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Indian Literature

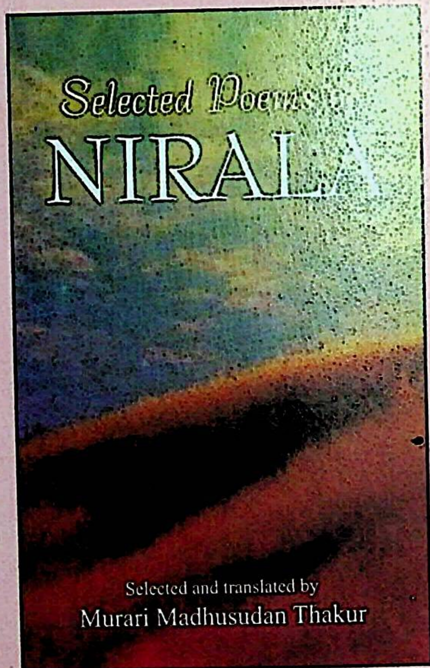
SAHITYA AKADEMI'S BI-MONTHLY JOURNAL



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Indian Literature

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Cover Paintings and Sketches: Panne Kunwar

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FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

I first got to know K. Ayyappa Paniker when Sahitya Akademi invited him to Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan in 1988 to participate in the 150th birth anniversary seminar on Bankimchandra. As the novice Regional Secretary of the Akademi's Eastern Regional Office at Kolkata, I was treating him with awe. But as we travelled together to Santiniketan, he put me at ease by treating me at par and frequently cracking good-humoured jokes at the cost of the Bengalees. Dr. Paniker had a soft corner for Kolkata and hardly ever refused any invitation either from my side or from Jadavpur University Comparative Literature Department where he had a number of friends and admirers. I have especially fond memories of our spending a few days together at Guwahati Circuit House right on the mighty Brahmaputra, on the occasion of the sixth birth centenary celebration of Sankaradeva. Professor Swapan Majumdar of Jadavpur University was also with us. Dr. Paniker enlivened the days by his dazzling wit and sharp sense of humour. He took a number of snaps of the Brahmaputra with me and Professor Majumdar in the frame. On return to Thiruvananthapuram, he sent some of these photographs with a lovely note. Later, he composed a long poem on the Brahmaputra and published it in a Malayalam magazine with one of these photographs. At my behest, he translated the poem in English and sent it to me, which I, in turn, got translated into Assamese and published in a reputed Assamese monthly along with the same photograph. Memory of his joyous smile at this turn of events still warms up my heart.

By a happy coincidence Dr. Paniker was appointed as a Trustee in the National Book Trust's Board of Trustees, during my four-year stint with the Trust. He always encouraged and guided me and would often give the wisest advice without making it sound so. Wearing his scholarship and wisdom lightly was one of his endearing qualities. I hope our readers will bear with me if I hold forth a little further on my relationship of mutual trust with Dr. Paniker. During 1988-90, Sahitya Akademi organized a few national workshops on translation with which he was closely associated, both in planning and execution. When he was entrusted with the responsibility of putting together all the papers and proceedings of these workshops, he registered my help and desired that the book so generated might be published by the Kolkata office. The Akademi authorities promptly agreed and I brought out the volume under the title *The Making of Indian Literature.*

The book is out of print and I promised Dr. Paniker last year when he came to Delhi to deliver our Samvatsar Lecture, that we shall reprint it soon. Alas, time flew and before the slightly revised volume could be brought out, he departed. I will ever cherish the memory of Dr. Paniker both as a human being and as a poet and scholar.

In this issue, we have four writers and poets reminiscing on Dr. Paniker—K. Satchidanandan, Rati Saxena, Amiya Dev and Sitakant Mahapatra. During the last two months, we have also lost Raja Rao, the last living member of the triumvirate of Indian English fiction, and ManoharRai SarDesai, the leading light of Konkani literature. Harish Trivedi writes on Raja Rao and Damodar Mauzo on ManoharRai SarDesai.

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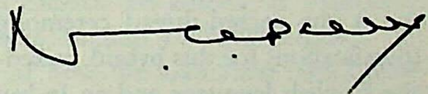
I have recently come across a poetry anthology entitled *Poets Against the War*. Published by Thunder's Mouth Press, New York in 2003, and edited by the leading American poet Sam Hamill, it is a landmark anthology—a collection of original poetry that registered each poet's opposition to America's Iraq war. Its origin can be traced back to the day when Sam Hamill received an invitation from the First Lady Laura Bush to a White House symposium on "Poetry and the American Voice". Upon opening her letter he was overcome by a sense of nausea and disgust, having only recently read George Bush's proposed "Shock and Awe" attack plan for Iraq, which called for saturation bombing. Ironically, the symposium was to be held in memory of Walt Whitman, Langston Hughes and Emily Dickinson, three of the most original and anti-establishment poets in American literature.

While former Poet Laureate Rita Dove, and other reputed poets like Stanley Kunitz and Robert Bly immediately refused the invitation in protest against Bush's Iraq policy, Sam Hamill reacted slightly differently. He composed an e-mail addressed to the "Friends and Fellow Poets" in which he called upon writers to "reconstitute a Poets Against the War movement like the one organized to speak out against the war in Vietnam." He asked each writer "to speak up for the conscience of our country and lend his or her name to our petition against this war" by submitting "a poem or statement of conscience to the Poets Against the War website."

The response was overwhelming. Over 13,000 poems were contributed by nearly 11,000 poets, which included unknown poets as well as celebrated ones like Adrienne Rich, W.S. Merwin, Robert Bly, Grace Schulman, Carolyn Kizer, Jim Harrison, Rita Dove and others. With the assistance of Sally Anderson, Hamill selected fewer than two hundred poems from the 13,000 and prepared this anthology with the intent of presenting it at the White House on the appointed day. But once the White House got wind

of his plans, the symposium was promptly "postponed". Mrs Bush's spokeswoman said, "While Mrs. Bush respects the right of all Americans to express their opinions, she, too, has opinions and believes it would be inappropriate to turn a literary event into a political forum." So much for "Poetry and the American Voice" at the White House!

However, the anthology was published in the midst of a huge mobilization by the poets: over 200 "poetry readings against the war" were held throughout the United States of America on February 12, 2003, the day the original White House symposium was scheduled. Poetry, its traditions, and its role in culture was discussed in news stories, on op-ed pages and in the streets as perhaps never before in the American nation's history. The voice of dissenting poets is always unwelcome to the authorities in the establishment, but it has been and will always be heard. This collection is both a cry against oppressive war and a celebration of the long and rich tradition of moral opposition and dissent by writers and artists.



Nirmal Kanti Bhattacharjee
Editor

Raja Rao: The Twice-Born Novelist

Harish Trivedi

Indian fiction in English is famously called the "twice-born" fiction, a term often (mis)understood to mean a high-caste, privileged, Brahminical literature. If this is indeed so, then it was Raja Rao who performed for it the sacred-thread ceremony, thus conducting a ritual of *shuddhi* (purification) for this hybrid, mixed-blood off-spring of the liaison between the English language and an Indian sensibility. It was Raja Rao who gave to the theme of the East-West encounter, which Ruth Jhabvala and Anita Desai were content to explore on social, cultural or racial terms, a deeper spiritual dimension.

Raja Rao, who passed away on 8 July 2006 at Austin, Texas, at the age of 97, was born on 8 November 1908 in Hassan (Karnataka). After the death of his mother when he was four, he was brought up in Harihalli by his grandfather who was a Sanskrit-knowing *vedantin*. He went to school in Hyderabad (where his father worked) to an elite *madarasa,* and then to the Nizam College, later moving on to the Aligarh Muslim University where he was reportedly the only Hindu boy in his class. Next, he was off on a scholarship to Montpellier and then to the Sorbonne, where he researched the Indian influence on Irish literature. His education was thus a blend not only of East and West (which has since become common enough in modern India), but also, so to say, of South and North and of Hindu and Muslim. Jawaharlal Nehru was to tease Raja Rao about his imperfect Hindustani (presumably acquired at Aligarh) during a meeting in Switzerland, while the terminally ailing Kamala, whose Hindi incidentally was better than Jawaharlal's, kindly sought to defend and protect Rao. (This occasion is recounted by Rao with gentle humor in his book of essays and sketches, *The Meaning of India.*)

Meanwhile, in Paris, Raja Rao had in 1931 married a French woman, Camille Mouly, and encouraged and supported by her, put his Ph. D.

aside, and launched on his first novel in English. This was *Kanthapura* (1938), which appeared by coincidence at about the same time as the first works of fictions by Mulk Raj Anand and R. K. Narayan, who had both made their fictional debut in 1935, with *Untouchable* and *Swami and Friends*, respectively. These three novelists were to go on to constitute the Holy Trinity of Indian Fiction in English for the succeeding half-century.

Kanthapura begins with the kind of breathtaking artistic boldness and ambition that no Indian writer of English was to match until *Midnight's Children* forty years later. Its short "Foreword" has been quoted so frequently in critical discussions of the Indian Novel in English that it has become, in effect, the manifesto of all Indian Writing in English. "The telling has not been easy," Raja Rao here said with fetching honesty—and then explained the nature of the creative difficulty, in terms so simple and true that they still have not been improved upon: "one has to express in a language that is not one's own emotions that are one's own." He predicted that with constant use, Indian English will emerge as a distinct if not autonomous variety, like American English or Irish English.

Kanthapura is a stirring depiction of how the Gandhian nationalist movement of 1930-31 reaches out to permeate a remote and supposedly "unchanging" village in Karnataka and to transform it radically. As a result of the impact of Gandhi Mahatma, the pariahs are no longer treated as untouchables, and even pious, illiterate grandmothers are motivated to go on a march to picket toddy-shops and to protest against the cruel injustice of "Hunter sahib," the owner of a neighbouring coffee estate. Gandhi is deified and taken by the simple villagers to be an avatar of Krishna; in fact, the first edition of the novel carried an epigraph on the title-page citing Krishna's assurance from *The Bhagavadgita*: "Whenever there is misery and ignorance, I come." In recent years, the "Subaltern" historians have often denigrated Gandhi by alleging that his message was no less religious than it was political. *Kanthapura* offers proof positive that this was indeed so, and that this was precisely where Gandhi's irresistible and incomparable appeal lay.

In any case, it is not as if Gandhi is sentimentally and uncritically iconized in this novel. In the end, the *satyagrahis* have been brutally pulped into defeat, they must retreat even from their village Kanthapura to go and settle elsewhere, and their leader, the young Moorthy who was the first among them to have been fired up by the Gandhian message, now turns away from Gandhi and feels more drawn to the socialist, "equal-distributionist" Nehru.

Kanthapura remains Rao's most widely read novel in India and abroad, both generally and in college classrooms, mainly because its early and

extensive treatment of Gandhian nationalism, and the stylistic experimentation through which Rao sought to give his English a Kannada-Sanskritic flavour and cadence, are both concerns that tie in aptly with the current post-colonial modes of reading literature. Indeed, *Kanthapura* is one of the most evocative and nuanced novels about Gandhian nationalism not only in English but in any Indian language, with only Premchand's great Gandhian epic *Rangabhumi* (1925) preceding and excelling it in scope and political radicalism. At the same time, the eponymous village in which *Kanthapura* is set is infinitely more remote than the village in which Premchand had partially set *Rangabhumi,* and the process of indirect patriotic filtration through which this village at the back of the beyond gets caught up in the nationalist mainstream is one of the aptest illustrations of the notion of the nation as an "imagined community," in not a negative but a positive sense.

After this debut novel, Raja Rao moved resolutely away from literature. Turning his back on France and his French wife, he returned to India to launch on a long quest for a guru who would lead him to the Truth. His quest took him to many *ashrama*s including Gandhi's Sevagram; his account of the power of Gandhi's ascetic personality, including his intense silences, is rendered with a novelist's delicate suggestivity. Ultimately, Raja Rao found the guru he sought in Swami Atmanand, in Thiruvananthapuram. When E. M. Forster, who had acclaimed *Kanthapura* as "the best novel to come out of India," visited Jaipur in 1945 to attend a writer's conference and wondered why Raja Rao was missing, Raja Rao wrote to explain: "I have abandoned literature for good and gone over to metaphysics."

Fortunately for literature, this did not quite prove to be so. In 1960, after a 22-year silence, Raja Rao returned to fiction with a novel titled *The Serpent and the Rope* — a metaphor which harks back to the great exponent of the Advaita philosophy, Sankaracharya. As an ignorant man mistakes a piece of rope to be a serpent, so he mistakes this world, which is merely *maya,* to be the reality. This foundational Hindu world-view is fleshed out in this clearly autobiographical novel through the conflict between the Indian hero Ramaswamy and his French wife Madeleine, with two other Indian women playing supportive allegorical roles.

Raja Rao's next work of fiction, *The Cat and Shakespeare* (1965), again evokes a metaphor from Sankara recommending that one should surrender oneself totally to Providence, as a kitten does to the mother cat, which carries it around in its mouth with the most tender care. It is a gently humorous and whimsical novella set in Thiruvananthapuram, and both the tone and the locale are in some ways reminiscent of Malgudi: "Our Revenue Board Third Member, Kunni Kutta Nair, fell with a thud

into his courtyard, and blood came out of his nose. It was diagnosed as one thing, and he died of another." The humour is less gentle and the touch less sure, however, in Rao's other novella from this period, *Comrade Kirillov* (published in French 1965, in English 1976) in which an Indian Marxist rails against Gandhi and Vedanta and is in turn trenchantly satirized by the novelist.

Raja Rao had meanwhile moved to America, and from 1966 to 1980 taught at the University of Texas at Austin, where enrollment in his classes often exceeded 200. Honours and awards multiplied: the Padma Bhushan in 1969, the Neustadt prize in 1988 (the so-called pre-Nobel or alternative Nobel, also won by Marquez, Milosz and Paz but by no other Indian), the Sahitya Akademi prize in 1964 and then its Fellowship, a far rarer honour, in 1997. Meanwhile, true to pattern, Raja Rao broke another two-decade long silence to publish in 1988 his longest and most ambitious novel, *The Chessmaster and his Moves*, in which the chessmaster is of course God himself and his moves are the *leela* or play through which the cosmos is created and sustained. The jury is still out on this work, which may prove to be either his life's crowning achievement, or a tired old rehash of *The Serpent and the Rope* — depending on what the two still unpublished parts turn out to contain, for this last work and testament is in fact a trilogy, of which the second volume, *The Daughter of the Mountain*, is scheduled to be published on Rao's next birthday, 8 November 2006.

Though Raja Rao has, with Anand and Narayan, been canonized as one of the three founding fathers of the Indian Novel in English, it is doubtful whether he saw himself primarily as a novelist. The courses he taught in America were not in literature but in Indian philosophy, and he spoke of the act of writing fiction as a form of *sadhana*. In one of the last public speeches of his life, delivered when the fellowship of the Sahitya Akademi was conferred on him at a special ceremony in Austin, Texas, in 1997, he referred to India as a "punya-bhumi" and said: "To have been born in India and not to have written in Sanskrit, or at least in Kannada is, believe me, an acute humiliation." Such a nativist cry of the heart may sound a little embarrassing if not politically incorrect, but it does perhaps represent an act of resistance to a real cultural threat in this age of Anglophone cosmopolitanism and monolingual globalization.

Raja Rao was a deeply contemplative and charismatically attractive man — "part Hamlet and part Krishna," as the British critic Alastair Niven described him in a recent tribute! He believed in austere living and high thinking. His novels are not everyone's cup of tea, and some readers have found him affected, pretentious and exasperating. But he had a sense of comic enjoyment — of *rasa* and *leela*, in his own favoured

terms — and like a true creative writer (or even a true seeker of the Truth), he spoke not of certainty of belief but of constant search and doubt and conflict. The clearly autobiographical hero of *The Serpent and the Rope* says in the very opening sentence of the novel: "I was born a Brahmin—that is, devoted to Truth and all that." As the wry tone indicates, high metaphysical Truth in Raja Rao came always wrapped up in plenty of fictional and imaginative "all that," and that is what makes for the rich humanity of his work.

With the passing away within the last few years of Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan and now Raja Rao, each in their nineties, an era of Indian writing in English comes to an end. Like the Trimurti, each of them faced in a different direction: Anand with his explicit political radicalism, Narayan with his gentle comedy and tolerance, Raja Rao with his spiritual consciousness and questing. While they were great contemporaries who were often bracketed together and mentioned in the same breath, they could not have been more different temperamentally even if they had tried to be.

As with the Triveni at the *sangam* in Allahabad, Narayan in his vision was the vast and serene Ganga, Anand the darker and more turbulent Yamuna, and Raja Rao the invisible but subterranean (*antahsalila*) Saraswati, best seen through the eye of faith. In their style and idiom too, Narayan wrote English as if it was unself-consciously and unproblematically his own language, Anand rode this foreign beast roughshod, prodding it along with the earthy exhortations of four-letter words in Panjabi, while Raja Rao sought harmoniously to domesticate English under the same roof .as Kannada as if they were co-wives. Towards the end of their lives, all these three writers were somewhat eclipsed in these market-driven "liberalized" times by a younger generation of Indian novelists in English, but that does not take away from the fact that they were the brave pioneers of the genre at a time when many thought it lacked credibility and viability. Anand, Narayan and Rao (or as I sometimes think of them as one composite triad, named Anand Narayan Rao) each became a classic in their own life-times, and now that all three are gone, we are left with mere contemporaries.

❑

Remembering Ayyappa Paniker

K. Satchidanandan

In the demise of K.Ayyappa Paniker Indian literature has lost one of its eloquent exponents and radical innovators. An avant-garde poet, an insightful critic, a profound scholar, a responsible translator, a careful editor, a rare teacher—Paniker's genius had diverse moods and hues. And he left his glow on everything he touched. He was to Malayalam what Gopal Krishna Adiga was to Kannada, Mardhekar to Marathi, Muktibodh to Hindi, Navkant Barua to Asomiya,Bishnu Dey to Bangla or Sachi Routray to Oriya or Faiz Ahmed Faiz to Urdu: all of them heralded a revolution in sensibility in their languages and marked a transition in the history of their literatures with their poems, translations and critical interventions.They also groomed a new generation of writers in their languages who would, even by denying them, carry forward the task that had engaged their whole life, of innovation in perspective and idiom.

Ayyappa Paniker was not just a poet; he was a literary personality who created his own age in literature by working in several genres and media and that is how I had known him even before I met him in 1966. I had already read many of Paniker's early poems like "The Love Song of a Surrealist", "Kurukshetram", "He", "Gagarin", "Agnipooja" and "Pururavas" and been impressed by their unconventional modes of conception as well as articulation. I was a post-graduate student of English literature at Maharaja's College, Ernakulam and had just begun to take writing seriously at that time; a few of my poems and articles had appeared in little magazines like *Sameeksha* and *Anveshanam*. I still vividly recall that meeting. He had already read all that I wrote and commented on the novelty and power of the images in my poems. He had come on some official mission, but in the evening some of us writers and students met in a conference room in a hotel near the college. That was the time

when the New Poetry was being hotly debated in Malayalam. Its detractors found fault with its new rhythms, use of blank verse and prose, obscure images and novel syntax while the admirers found it refreshing after the tyranny of the stale, cliché-ridden poetry of the imitators of great romantics like Changampuzha Krishna Pillai. Paniker was the very embodiment of all that was new in thinking as well as poetry at that time and had already inspired many younger poets like Kadammanitta Ramakrishnan, Madhavan Ayyappath, N. N. Kakkad, M. N. Paloor, Cheriyan K. Cheriyan, T. R. Sreenivas and several others including me. That informal evening meet had only the supporters of the New—like the fiction writer Ponjikkara Raphy, the author of *Swargadootan*, the first stream-of-consciousness novel in Malayalam—M. Thomas Mathew, a critic of note and T. Ramachandran who later went on to become a major writer of New Fiction under the pen name, T.R. We discussed the state of contemporary poetry and the need for a journal to give an impetus to the whole Movement and then Paniker read out, in his characteristic style in his gentle voice, his new poem, "Mrityupooja" (Hymn to Death). I did like the poem and the cadence of its *dandaka* metre used in the *Kathakali* verse, but I, the kind of confused existential Leftist that I was then, had ideological reservations about its mood of total hopelessness, a reservation I did not hide from the poet. To my great surprise I found that when the poem was published in *Mathrubhumi* weekly, it ended with a kind of apology for Ravana's dance of death and the hope that Sita will be retrieved from the netherworld of darkness: in its earlier version, it had ended repeating the initial invitation to death. I felt so happy to assume that perhaps my criticism had something to do with this change in the published version.

That was the beginning of an intimate relationship that went on acquiring new depths until his painful final parting on 23 August. In 1967, we—twenty poets and critics—together launched *Kerala Kavita*, a poetry quarterly that became the mouthpiece of the new movement. Not that it did not publish good conventional poetry; only its emphasis was on New Poetry. It encouraged all of us to experiment, translate and share our thoughts about poetry with the readers. Each issue had, besides poems in Malayalam, translations of bunches of poems by one non-Malayali Indian poet and one poet from abroad, close studies of individual poems, critical articles on current trends and revaluations of older poets from fresh points of view. Ayyappa Paniker and *Kerala Kavita* played a major role in developing the translator and the critic in me. I had written some articles and done some translations earlier, but now I found myself translating significant poets from India and abroad like Chairil Anwar

from Indonesia, Eugenio Montale from Italy, Zbignew Herbert from Poland, and Jibanananda Das from Bengal and writing studies of poetry and evaluating the new trends in poetry from time to time.The readers may well imagine how crucial this kind of a rigorous training must have been to a poet in his early twenties. Mine was no isolated case; Kadammanitta Ramakrishnan translated Octavio Paz's masterpiece, *The Sunstone*, the poems of Senghor from Senegal and Cesar Vallejo from Peru for the quarterly as also Beckett's path-breaking play, *Waiting for Godot*; Attoor Ravivarma did Voznesensky and Madhavan Ayyappath did Gopala Krishna Adiga. There were issues focusing on the New Kannada Poetry and Tamil Poetry too. Paniker himself translated T. S. Eliot (including his "The Wasteland") Nicolas Guillen and Pablo Neruda. Poets and readers of poetry looked forward to the meetings to release each issue of *Kerala Kavita* held in different towns including Chennai and Bangalore as they always had exciting poets' meets with a lot of new voices and stimulating discussions of poetry around papers most of which were written, embarrasingly, by me on Paniker's insistence. My first collection of essays on poetry, *Kurukshetram*, contained mostly articles published in *Kerala Kavita* including studies of three of Paniker's own poems, "Kurukshetram", "Pururavas" and "Mrityupooja" (later I wrote one on his "Pakalukal, Ratrikal" (Days, Nights) and also general evaluations of his poetry in Malayalam and English, the latter for Jayanta Mahapatra's publication, *Chandrabhaga*. Many of the poems in my first collection, *Anchusooryan* (Five Suns) also had poems published in the same quarterly including the title poem that had appeared in the very first issue. Paniker continued to edit *Kerala Kavita* until he passed away, though its second incarnation, as an annual, did not have the same impact as the quarterly, not for any decline in quality; it had survived its original mission as the herald of New Poetry in the language. Still it continued publishing the youngest of writers and translations from around the world. The last translations I did for *Kerala Kavita* last year were of poetry from North-East India. One of Paniker's last wishes, expressed to its publisher M. M. Basheer, was that *Kerala Kavita* may not stop publication even after he was gone: what else can prove better the great commitment he had to the cause it stood for?

Paniker had his own ways of creating and looking at poetry, but he never imposed them on younger poets like us. At least from the Seventies of the last century onwards I have been writing a very different kind of poetry though it did share his inclination for stylistic innovation and his sense of irony. In fact it was Paniker himself who published my "Satyavangmoolam" (My Testament) which was a kind of declaration of faith, mine as well as that of my generation and marked a turning

point in my poetry as also in the New Poetry in Malayalam after the change heralded by Paniker. By that time all of us younger poets had begun to create our own modernisms that often disagreed with Paniker's modes and mores. I even wrote an article criticising Paniker's seemingly apolitical stance. But he continued to treat me with great affection and respected our difference, a quality one seldom finds in senior poets most of whom want younger writers to be their perpetual disciples and mimics. Later however I have come to feel that Paniker was political in his own way. He ridiculed the ways of the world, exposed hypocrisy of every kind and reacted to a crisis like the Emergency with a series of caustic cartoon-poems; only he refused to be bound by any definite ideology that he knew would circumscribe his poetry. He continued to encourage me unobtrusively, without ever making me feel he was 'patronising' me. It was he who introduced me to great Indian poets and world poets of note through the Poetry Festivals organised by Bharat Bhavan and ICCR and recommended me to the Sahitya Akademi to join the team of Indian poets participating in the Festival of India in the now-extinct Soviet Union, which was my second trip abroad, the first being to Yugoslavia to take part in the Sarajevo Poetry Days on the recommendation of someone I never knew—the Hindi poet Sreekant Verma who had read me only in translations. I translated some of Paniker's poetry into English on my own that he liked immensely and encouraged me to do more translations — not only of his poetry — into English.That gave me enough confidence to translate a lot of Malayalam poetry into English for various occasions. He was also responsible for my joining the Sahitya Akademi as the Editor of *Indian Literature.* I was extremely reluctant to leave Kerala where I had my home and friends and readers; but for his sweet persuasion I would never have moved to Delhi. It was a decision that changed my life: I am not speaking of the various recognitions my work received in the capital, but the new dimensions it gave to my life-experience, the new orientations it gave to my literary enquiries and knowledge and the new directions it gave to my writing in general and poetry in particular. He never refused my invitations to Delhi, for poetry readings as well as talks. He was also a regular contributor to *Indian Literature.* He readily agreed to edit the revised edition of the *Encyclopedia of Indian Literature* on my request, and also to deliver the Samvatsar Lecture at the Sahitya Akademi last February that unfortunately was his last major public programme. He had had a long association with the Akademi, having been on its Boards and also edited for it a collection of Indian poetry in English and the marvellous 4-volume anthology of *Medieval Indian Literature.*

The last time I met him was about a month before his demise at his house in Trivandrum. I gave him my Collected Poetry in three volumes that had just come out and asked about his well-being. He knew by then he did not have much time left—he had begun, very unusually for him, to speak about the impending death even a few months before when the first symptoms of his lung malfunction had appeared. He held my hands tight and thanked me for having been with him through thick and thin: this was so uncharacteristic of Paniker who abhorred all show of sentiment that I could no more stand in front of him, looking at that weak frame.

2

This is not the time to attempt an evaluation of Ayyappa Paniker's contribution to literature. As a poet Paniker was the very embodiment of the spirit of Modernism in Malayalam. His "Kurukshetram" (1960) was the scream of a mind torn by the contradictions of our time. Arjuna here is not the character in *Mahabharata* who is assuaged and goaded into battle by the eloquence of Krishna, but the lonely, inconsolable human being who inherits the central dilemmas of his age—of hubris and of the hatred,violence, poverty, estrangement from nature and the war that it breeds. He does not trust the truths of religion or ideology any more as both have led to senseless bloodshed. He finds that the *bodhi* and the cross are redundant if only we will just become human and rise on our own navels. "Kurukshetram" was a break-through in terms of form and structure too. The poet mixed metres, took freedoms with them, coined new expressions and created fresh, often sur-real, images like the ripe corpses waiting to wake up in cradles.The poem had also a sprinkling of black humour and irony like when the poet asks, do the world-banks hold the key to truth, or, who will cook and serve the new Veda, does it need to be fried with mustard? "Kurukshetram" fascinated the readres of my generation who were waiting for something new, free from the cliches of romantic poetry while it angered the champions of the *status quo* who rejected it as unpoetic gibberish. The poet-editor of the famous *Mathrubhumi Weekly* returned the manuscript to the naughty youngster and it was then picked up by C. N. Sreekantan Nair, a modern playwright who at that time used to edit the weekly *Desabandhu*.

"Kurukshetram" was followed by many others, each different from

the other. "Mrityupooja" (The Hymn to Death) "Kudumba-puranam" (The Family Saga), "Pakalukal, Rathrikal" (Days, Nights) "Passage to America", "Gopikadandakam", "Ivide Jeevitam" (Here, Life) and "Gotrayanam" are perhaps his most outstanding works. In the long poem "Gotrayanam" Paniker returns to his racial roots and recreates history in the form of a journey while "Days, Nights" and "The Passage to America" are sequence poems that deal with the many contradictions of life in the U.S. where, at Indiana, Paniker had spent some years pursuing his postdoctoral research. "Kudumbapuranam" deals, with his characteristic irony, with the history of his own family in Kuttanad in Kerala. "Ivide Jeevitam" (Here, Life) is a gathering of his experiences during his tour to Russia and East Europe in a sequence of poems, one of his favourite forms, used in all his travel poems. His dark satires during the years of the Emergency in India revealed the conscientious objector in Paniker while his sarcastic poems on power and corruption as well as his series of 'Cartoon Poems' and 'The Tales of the Maharajah' used irony as a weapon to fight evil and as a new tool to comprehend the tragi-comic human condition. He went on renewing himself all through his poetic career that resulted in the astounding formal variety of his poetry. He tried Sanskrit metres, the metre of the *kathakali* verse and of the *tullal* verse, various Dravidian metres, free verse patterns and prose of different kinds and tones. The range of his verbal resources and cultural registers was equally astounding. He liberated the art of poetry from its orthodox confines giving the posterity a range of formal possibilities and plenty of experimental space.

While editing *Kerala Kavita* Paniker also kept writing and translating and editing many series of books. The four volumes of *Medieval Indian Literature* he edited for the Sahitya Akademi is an exemplary collection while he also edited the *Complete Works of Shakespeare* and a series of 120 world classics in Malayalam translation. He was nominating editor for *Katha*, Delhi and consulting editor for *The Journal of South Asian Literature*, Michigan (of which two issues were entirely devoted to Malayalam writing) besides many other literary publications. Paniker also edited a series of monographs in English on the English Writers of Kerala. His books on Thakazhi Sivasankarapillai, V.K. Krishna Menon, Vallathol and Sardar K.M. Paniker, his short works like *A Short History of Malayalam Literature*, *Indian Renaissance* and *Indian English Literature*, his literary articles collected in three volumes, his books on Indian poetics, especially the one on the principle of *antassannivesam* that Paniker distinguishes from intertextuality—all these are monuments to his stupendous scholarship and profound grasp of the different traditions of literature and poetics. His collections of poetry

in English translation, *The Poems of Ayyappa Paniker, Days, Nights* and *I Can't Help Blossoming* that bring together poems selected from his four volumes in Malayalam besides the last published collection, *Pathumanippookkal*, are a good introduction to his poetry for the non-Malayali readers. His students remember him as a committed teacher and a wonderful communicator, always abreast of the developments in world literature and literary theory. His translations of the poems of Mayakovsky, poems from Cuba, Raja Rao's *Cat and Shakespeare* and Jean Toomer's *Sugarcane* are great examples of translation of poetry and prose. Ayyappa Paniker was also an excellent speaker, clear-headed, cogent in his arguments, lyrical in his expressiveness and always witty and original in his insights into authors, texts and issues. He was also interested in theatre, both classical and modern and was an inspiration behind Margi, an organisation to promote *kathakali* and classical arts. He also encouraged New Drama in Malayalam, especially its pioneers like G. Sankara Pillai and Kavalam Narayana Paniker and was a chief force behind the Nataka Kalari — a modern theatre workshop — established by C.N. Sreekantan Nair, another major playwright. He wrote articles not only about poetry, but on fiction, theatre, cinema, acting and aesthetics too, many of which are yet to be collected. This is also true about his essays in English still lying scattered in various journals across the world.

Paniker never went after awards and recognitions, yet he won most of the major Indian awards for literature, including the Sahitya Akademi Award, Bhilwara Award from the Bharatiya Bhasha Parishad, Gangadhar Meher Award, Kabir Samman and Saraswati Samman, not to speak of the many poetry awards he won in Kerala. He accepted them with humility, the sole exception being the Vayalar Award, the most popular award for literature in Kerala which he refused, probably as it came to him too late. He was never tempted by power of any kind and politely refused an invitation to be the vice-chancellor of a university in Kerala. His works have been translated into all the major languages of India besides several forein languages like French and Spanish.

Ayyappa Paniker was one of India's best cultural ambassadors to the world outside as he knew not only the new, but the classical as well. He was all for the modern, but had deep appreciation for tradition, especially its elements that would inspire new invention in art and literature.With his loss, India has lost a unique genius, an integrated human being equally at home and equally creative in diverse fields of art and knowledge.

❑

Ayyappa Paniker

Amiya Dev

Ayyappa Paniker was my friend. I had known him for a long time. He lived in Thiruvananthapuram and I in Kolkata, so it was not everyday that we met. But we met quite often, either in his hometown or in mine, or elsewhere at academic or literary meetings. The last I met him was a year and a half ago in Delhi when he was giving the Akademi's Samvatsar Lecture. He was looking very frail. But he had not lost his inimitable sense of humour: we exchanged one or two pleasantries. In fact that was quite customary, he would be very crisp and I rather wet. I once wrote an over-critical-review of one of his books, he responded by sending me an essay of his complementing my views. Then when *I Can't Help Blossoming* came out, where he had put together the English translations of some of his recent poems, mostly by his own hand, he sent me a copy. He also sent me a copy of – in fact two copies, for he could not remember if he had sent me one – *Au-delà de la mort*, containing a number of his poems in French translation done by diverse hands—'avec l'amour', he had inscribed. I was touched, for he had hoped that I would relish the French. But I did relish the English of *I Can't Help Blossoming*, and I was invited to contribute to a book of essays on him. Was I being given a second chance to bury my righteousness and respond to his humour? I should have asked him. But these past years he was not going out of Kerala much. When at the Kolkata Book Fair of 2005, Utpalkumar Basu's Bangla translation of his award-winning book of poems was brought out by the Akademi, he could not keep his word to be there. Yet Kolkata was one of his favourite places and he wouldn't normally miss an opportunity to be there. If one had a chance to ask him why he couldn't come, he might have said with a twinkle in his eye, but I was there, wasn't I, for he had been there so many times, and also written that fascinating poem "Kolkata-Thiruvananthapuram."

Only once before to my knowledge he had not come at the last minute and sent a cable instead saying he was "Going to Cuba".

But that was a different story. The invitation had been to a comparative literature seminar at Jadavpur University. Indeed there was a time when the Jadavpur department could not think of doing a seminar without Ayyappa Paniker in it, and not just a seminar or a conference, the departmental journal too could not often do without his contribution. Some of the department's alumni would recall his lectures during a visiting assignment. Besides, whenever invited he would help its faculty selection. All this was not simply because he had been a close friend of Naresh Guha's who had been steering the department after Buddhadeva Bose, the founder, but also because he was himself a votary of comparative literature. If it were not for him then the comparative literature centre would not have materialized at the University of Kerala, seemingly as an extension of its English Institute but with a good deal of Indian literary agenda on the table. Again, if it were not for his constant support, then K.M. George might not have been able to compile his two-volume *Comparative Indian Literature* under the auspices of Kerala Sahitya Akademi. He gave encouragement to the first Indian association of comparative literature and for a while thought of a Dravidian wing as well. His *Spotlight on Comparative Literature* is part witness to his dedication to the discipline. When a few years ago the Kerala University Centre hosted the national congress he was its principal adviser. But ill health kept him away from the recent conference at Kottayam hosted by the School of Letters of Mahatma Gandhi University, so dear to his sense of eclecticism. I remember every time I met K. Satchidanandan since that Samvatsar Lecture, I enquired about Ayyappa Paniker's health. Was he confined home, was he not going out at all?

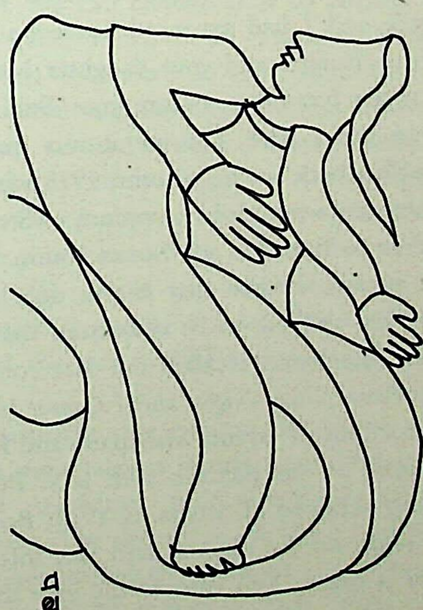
Set to writing these words, memories come rushing. He and I are riding a taxi, paid for by him, to a small village by the sea outside Thiruvananthapuram to meet V.I. Subramanian, the linguist who had set up an institute to answer his ideals of language studies; and on our way back he is talking of *antahsannivesa*, his newly thought-up critical method. We are watching part of a Kathakali performance by Thiruvananthapuram's Margi and later visiting their dressing room taking a look at the masks. I am staying at Trivandrum Hotel during a visiting assignment to his Institute of English and he takes me to the elderly K.C. Pillai who owns the hotel but who is all steeped in Rabindranath. He introduces me to one of his successors, poet Vinayachandran, saying how good and yet how different he is. We are talking to Habib Mohammad, his one-time classmate and now University of Kerala's vice-chancellor, whose passion

is reading modern classics of fiction. A seminar is in progress at the university senate hall where he is one of the speakers and so are eminent Malayalam writers like S. Guptan Nair and Sukumar Azhikode, whom I come to meet through him. Another seminar at the same venue scintillating with Malayalam literary skirmishes, and yet another at Calicut where he helps develop an academic interest in comparative literature. I am ringing his bell at 'Sarovaram', his house at 111 Gandhi Nagar, Thiruvananthapuram 695014 (his letters have so consistently carried his address that it has stuck to my mind) and he opens, ready to take me later to a neighbourhood restaurant for dinner. Many other memories including my escorting him to Naresh Guha's the last time or one of the last times he was in Kolkata, and much earlier, his getting me indirectly involved a couple of times for the Asan Memorial Prize nomination and in getting a book out on him where he wanted to put Sankha Ghosh's piece on Kumaran Asan in English translation, done at my request by Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta. How could I forget that it was he who had directed me to the Ravi Varma collection at the Thiruvananthapuram Art Institute? Indeed it was he who had introduced me to Kerala. If I mention Thakazhi's *Kayar* now in any connection, I owe it to him, for it was he who some two decades ago spoke on this late novel of the master at a seminar at Dhvanyaloka.

C.D. Narasimhaiah's Dhvanyaloka was a place where I used to hear Ayyappa often. CDN had that rare quality of getting companionable minds together concerned with Indian literature and arts. Ayyappa was a regular speaker there coinciding with my novitiate. His exposition on the semiotics of Kathakali still flashes through my mind, no less than the words he said introducing a Kudiyattam performance as part of the Narrative seminar at the Akademi a decade and a half ago. He had a deep voice, but when it came to reading out poetry, it took on a trill giving at the same time a sense of his craft. Listening to him was a regular treat. He had warmth that knew when to call it a day and retire—there was no touch of gregariousness about him. Death hasn't robbed me of his image and I can visualize him in a group at Dibrugarh 1992 with Sisir Kumar Das, Indranath Chaudhuri, Swapan Majumdar, Chandra Mohan and myself, as Nagen Saikia's guests, where he was probably the most laconic though not lacking in gestures that had a semiotic of their own. He was my fellow Indiana University alumnus, but he never forced that on me, and if I tried to do that he would remind me that Sitanshu (Yashaschandra) too had been there. Recently we had exchanged a few e-mails – he had a query, for instance, about something from Bangla and I answered to the best of my knowledge – but his

were usually brief though mine I suppose were a bit effusive. Come to think of it, his letters too over the years were never very long, in fact quite short, often postcards. When I heard from P.P. Raveendran that Ayyappa had been put under intensive care, I sent a mail to our common friend Anantha Murthy who wrote back wondering why this should happen to Ayyappa who unlike some of us had never done any excesses.

At the Kottayam conference earlier this year to which he could not come, I read out the English translation of a poem of his to give an instance of how an aspect of globalization had been treated by him. This was no news to the Malayalis in my audience, but this was perhaps an indirect tribute to one of their living poets from a non-Malayali. That poet is dead today. I mourn his death.



Ayyappa Paniker Singing on the Shores of Twilight

Sitakant Mahapatra

Dear Ayyappa,

The morning media brought the sad news that you were no more with us. Malayalam literature and Indian literature had lost a towering figure. I had lost a friend. You had finally left Sarovaram, III Gandhinagar, Thiruvananthapuram. With pride you once narrated how you built that house where my wife and I had savoured home-made idli, dosha and coffee, talking to Mrs. Paniker and your daughter Meera. From Meera, I could know about the few hours before your final departure. In the death of friends, we die a little. For me it was quite a bit more.

My mind travelled back to the autumn 1975 when you joined me in the flight at Bombay on a month-long sojourn to Struga poetry festival in Macedonia and then to Romania and Soviet Union. That was the first time I saw you in person. Before that it was only letters or a voice on the telephone. It was difficult to be convinced that both had ended. I went back to your last letter, recalled our last conversation, opened the pages of *Selected Poems, Days, Nights* and *I Cannot Help Blossoming* with the perceptive introductions of Jayanta Mahapatra and K. Satchidanandan. In my album, I looked at our pictures with K.V. Puttappa at Mysore and both of us being received at Struga in 1975. Both of us naturally look younger, your smile on the clean-shaven face infectious. Long after you decided to grow a beard. You enjoyed my joke that this new *avatar* was another step towards sainthood.

In Jayanta's words 'the truth of the poems lay on my table'. Did you have your shy wife and beloved daughter in mind when you wrote these four lines?

In the end, bereft of me, alone you wait
on the terrace of your new house, for the lights of the
sky,
watching the bright glow of the moon fade away,
seeing the night's darkness blacken the earth and sky.

I recalled the many places we had been together. Our talking in soft voices not to disturb the eerie silence of lush-green Thekkady, looking at sun-sets at Kovalam, Kanyakumari, lake Okhrid at Struga and lake Baikal. The fabulous yellow-red sky of Siberia hang over the exotic city Irkutsk on the Baikal. Once when you had asked me if I intended visiting Sabarimala, I had quipped that for me Thiruvananthapuram's Lord Ayyappa was good enough. With that your gentle, mysterious, and affectionate smile played on your face for a while. You said you too would not dare visiting it as you were too feminine! At Thiruvananthapuram you took me to a Kathakali rehearsal session to talk to the artists as their faces were being painted. Together we visited city temples and our dear common friend Aravindan, the maker of *Pokkuveyil,* (to me the poet of Indian cinema) and the house of poet Vishnu Narayanan Namboodiri.

The Eastern Europe visit enabled us to be together for four long (and short!) weeks. We had enough time to interact with the poets and writers like Ivan Lalic, Vasko Popa, Yugoslav Poets at Belgrade, the Romanian Poet Aurel Covaci at Bucharest, Rima Kazakova, Akhmadulina and others at Moscow and Leningrad. Every evening after the group discussion with them we used to discuss them individually with each other. I saw how different was our food habits as we courageously faced various kinds of food, some of them exotic. A vegetarian with simple food habits, I could see you missed dosa, idli, sambar, chatni and lemon-rice. Your dress was always simple and informal except when the occasion was formal. The suitcase you carried was small and the contents sparse. When we returned the only weight added was of the books presented to us.

I recall in particular one incident during our visit. We were on a short flight over a mountainous terrain from Tbilisi, Georgia's capital to Erevan, capital of Azerbaijan. Half way it encountered dense clouds, thunder and lightning. The aircraft shook like a tiny leaf in a storm. The cries of kids only heightened the panic of the adults. Holding tight the hand-rests of our seats, we looked at each other. I said "Ayyappa, let us prepare to meet our Lord." You held my hand tight in a gesture of keeping up my spirits. Perhaps the Lord was not yet ready to receive us! We reached Erevan safe but shaken. I had never faced that kind of turbulence in my life till that date. I hope never again I should have

that experience. Confessing a similar traumatic feeling you added "Paniker who never panics, really panics this time." You were very fond of that pun.

I vividly recall two other events during our visit. One, the extremely tiring long flight over Siberia from Pyatigorsk in the Caucasus to Irkutsk on lake Baikal with two stopovers at Omsk and Cheliabinsk. The aircraft was fairly small with no service of food and its windows were permanently closed preventing any sighting of the outside world. Later, we were told they had to keep the cost low cutting out facilities as people with low incomes had to travel by air because of the enormous distances. The other thing I remember was our visit to the Dostoevsky and Pushkin museums at Leningrad which was also the city of Akhmatova. Back in our hotel we read her poems late into the night. So too was our visit to Lermontov's Memorial at Pyatigorsk and the site where he had fought his fatal sword fight, like Pushkin.

I had known you as a prominent poet, a formidable scholar of literature, a Fulbright scholar, a teacher, a critic, a translator, a popular figure in seminars and one in love with Kerala's cultural heritage and sad about many contemporaneous developments. The month-long travelling together enabled me an opportunity to see the man behind the poet and scholar. I saw how you laughed, joked, enjoyed jokes, missed your wife and children back home. I remember how we relished the Ukranian *kharbhuj* (water melon). I saw how and when you got angry, sad and morose. I shared your happiness at the news of Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award for *Ayyappa Panikerude Kruthikal*.

I had known you as a poet friend who was the first to translate me into Malayalam. You translated my three long-poems on Jara, Kubja and Yashoda and asked for the originals in Devnagari script which you did into Malayalam and published them together on facing pages in Kerala Sahitya Akademi's journal *Sahityalokam*. Later, you translated and edited (with poet Vinaychandran, K. A. Paniker, and Dr. P. Ramchandran) *Yasodayute Paattu*. We enjoyed Agzibekov using the word *Kaputa* with the gesture of cutting his own throat when he could not arrange boating for us in lake Baikal. The word stuck to us forever to be repeated whenever we met or spoke on telephone. There were occasions when we differed on our assessment of the writers we met and the Soviet view of art, literature and culture. I recall in particular how we debated re-reading Dostoevsky by Y. Karyakin. We saw the intimate details of Dostoevsky's life, the chains and the metal bowl in which food was served to him when he was a prisoner in Leningrad. The novelist use to smoke a lot

when he worked at his table. The museum authorities had preserved a hand-written note quietly put on the table with the advice "Father you should not smoke so much." That evening we discussed how much we agreed with Dostoevsky's saying "I am not good at singing lullabies, though I have tried that too." The travel enabled me to see you as a person, soft-spoken, quiet, friendly, satirical and who enjoyed my leg-pullings!

For me a place is always a person. You said how the places we visited were growing within you and perhaps would become poems. They did and there were poems titled Beograd "(Belgrade)", "Struga", "Skopje"; "Bucuresti" (Bucharest), "Iasi" (Jash), "Constantza and Moskva" (Moscow) forming a section *Here Life* in your *Selected Poems* which I received immediately on its publication, with a letter "fondly remembering our days in those places."

II

You dedicated yourself to poetry and literature stretching over five decades. As one of the pioneers in modern Malayalam poetry you created a new idiom and a new sensibility. In your poetry one can see both serious and mocking tones often with a sense of humour behind which lurked a tragic feeling. Irony came to you almost naturally. I admired one of your early works "Kurukshetram". I agree with Satchidanandan that 'the two American sequences—"Days, Nights" (1970) and "Passage to America" (1972) reveal fully the possibilities and the limitations of Paniker's poetry—his pre-occupation with love, death and the futility of life, his aversion to politics, war and urbanity, his black humour, his frail passions of lust.' You are deservedly held in high esteem as a poet and a path-finder in modern Malayalam poetry. You fashioned a new poetics and a new tradition combining commitment and aestheticism. Now you have become a part of Malayalam's long poetic tradition. As a teacher and critic you had acquired a high reputation. Your critical works are perceptive and often break new ground. Your Gopinath Mohanty Memorial lecture, titled "Gopinath Mohanty and Indian Narrative Tradition" was hugely admired. Once three of us—yourself, myself and the Russian professor Vasiliev, at that time in the Institute of English—debated certain theoretical aspects of modern poetry and it was easy to see the vast range and depth of your knowledge of literary issues and your sharp ability for analysis. As a translator your conscientious approach to the task was enviable. I had an early acquaintance with it when, as earlier mentioned, you translated

my own poetry. As an editor, you have done a lot, prominent among them being the admirable works on Medieval Indian Literature and, of course many other anthologies. You spoke of your regret of not being able to keep alive your pet literary journal *Kerala Kavita* edited by you. You had been on visiting fellowships in several American Universities. I recall your letters from those places, in particular the one on your meeting with poet Robert Bly for whom I have great admiration.

There have been many critical accounts on your poetry and I am sure there will be many more as the years roll on. Both your elders, your contemporaries, those coming after you, the most distinguished including poets of the younger generation, held you in high esteem even when some of them followed a different track in their themes and styles. That is perhaps as it should be, for poets and writers respect their tradition but differ from it and challenge it.

Several Literary awards and Sammans came to you over the years, and it is a long list including Padmashree, the latest being Saraswati Samman. You would not be there to receive it in person.

In your poetry, you tried to combine the dialectics of acceptance and denial, the sublime and the ridiculous, holiness and vulgarity. You wanted the poems to convey the feeling of mind and thought, both being a mode of restlessness in their search for meaning. 'By the time this vain task ends, life ends too'. In our one month's journey abroad, you spoke about "Kurukshetram" and what went into its making. The long poem happens to be also one of your long poems I liked. Satchidanandan in his "Ayyappa Paniker's Poetry: An Afterword" writes, "He listens to the screams of Macedonia and brings together the anguished Abraham offering Issac to his God and Bhagat Singh, crowned with vines and veins." Satchidanandan adds how you once bought a bunch of flowers from a lame flower-girl with "wintered legs" and "autumnal eyes" and offered it back to her as a present. It is symbolic of the life we "consecrate with love-chants" upon our earth "crumbling down all around us in spite of the transparent net of supporting dreams." I happened to be a witness to this purchase of flowers from the little lame flower girl at a street corner as both of us were returning from an open air restaurant at Bucharest to our hotel nearby.

We poets often have the misfortune of seeing our dreams being trampled and mutilated. But we remain determined to celebrate life, man's hopes and dreams. You were fond of Greece and I feel it spoke to you a lot. When you spoke of Zorba of Kazantzakis, I saw your immense liking for the character and its author. I have the same feeling. Then you wrote:

To be spent on reflections over past sorrows,
Please, go on playing nonstop on the santoori,
Until the dawn arrives that brings joy,
Until Zorba sings on the shores of twilight.

For the Zorba of Thiruvananthapuram the shores of twilight have disappeared into the darkness of night.

❑



Everything is in the Past Tense Now

Rati Saxena

That day, when I went to see Ayyappa Paniker along with Pradeep before leaving for Ladakh, on the 18th of June of this year, he looked totally distressed as he said—*ellam poi* (Every thing has gone) "now there is only past tense." He looked pale, thin and tired. I was stunned, as I was not aware of his poor condition. He was saying, "I have lived so much, I have done what I could do, now why should I worry, let death come." He was consoling himself as we sat quietly not knowing how to console him.

"I have no problem, I need a little oxygen to live, and you know I have written about oxygen in my poems. Now I am facing the same problem." He was still consoling himself. Light and shadows were passing through his face one after another; still his few gestures were sharp and dominant as before. After a few moments he gained his own old humorous mood and asked Pradeep, "So you people are going to the Himalayas, are you planning to meet Shiva on Kailash? You can communicate through satellite." Pradeep replied back as usual, "Yes, we would certainly like to meet him, if he likes to meet us." While we were getting ready to go he again fell into depression. He said to Pradeep. "I am lucky that you people came from far off places and became my friends. Please bless me, before going on your Yatra; (was he thinking about his Yatra? I doubt now). Pradeep quietly put his hands on Dr. Paniker's head, and then took his hands in his own.... He turned to me and asked—"Do I look like my own ghost?" I replied, "No, you are very much the same Ayyappa Paniker. I touched his feet and sought his blessings for the yearly celebration of *Kritya* which was supposed to be held in Jammu (my web journal—www.kritya.in) he blessed me—"*ellam nannavum* (every thing will be great); you are going to achieve a lot in future."

If some body claims to know Ayyappa Paniker, then he is certainly

mistaken, as knowing Ayyappa Paniker is impossible, such a complex personality that he was. I had always felt that he was five feet above the earth and ten feet below, still I say that I know him for more than 12 years. Those days when I was working with Kerala Hindi Prachar Sabha, I happened to meet Muneendra ji of Kalpna (Hyderabad) in a meeting. He told me, "Rati ji you must bring Malayalam literature into Hindi through translation, otherwise how can you return the debt you owe this land where you are living for long?" Thus the idea of translation dawned in my mind. After some time I got a letter from *Bhasha*, a journal from Delhi to send them a Malayalam poem of a contemporary poet. I asked Balakrishna Pillai of Hindi Prachar Sabha regarding this. As per his instructions I went to see Ayyappa Paniker who had his office near Hindi Prachar Sabha. I was seated in the waiting room and after some time a short man with gray beard came down the steps. His broad smile and big teeth were in contrast to his sad deep eyes; he did not look like a poet to me until he spoke. When I asked for a poem to translate, he asked me—"Can you read Malayalam?"

"Not very well, sir!" I replied honestly.

He smiled and went up again and brought a small book of poetry. While giving this book he asked me to see the poem "Kannamma". I thanked him and came back. I translated that poem with the help of others.

Then a time came in my life, when I was too disappointed with the dirty politics in Kerala Hindi Prachar Sabha. I was sad and lonely. In that mood I opened the book given by Ayyappa Paniker and tried to read some of his poems. The title of the first poem was "Kurukshetram" which attracted me because of the state of my mind then. To release my tension I started reading and translating that poem. By the time I completed the poem, I had become a fan of the poet. "Kurukshetram" was the poem which had changed the direction of Malayalam poetry and a whole generation of poets got inspired by this poem. Even though I had accidentally read it, I too became an admirer of the poem in the end. A few months later, Ayyappa Paniker phoned me and asked he "can you translate a few stories of a Malayalam writer?" I agreed happily and went to his office and he gave me Chandramati's stories. When I went to give him the translations of those stories, he gave me five poems of his own—"Video Death" and others (these poems got published in journals like *Vagarth, Samakaleen Sahitya* etc and attracted a number of people.)

I could not digest those poems at first, may be because of my

immaturity; but when I handed over the translations, he asked me for the first time—"How do you like Kerala?"

"I used to like Kerala, while I was staying at home, but when I come out to work, I do not like the politics of my place of work." I replied

He smiled and said, "Read Malayalam literature, you will like Kerala certainly."

Then he asked hesitatingly, "Would you like to translate a book of poetry; Sahitya Akademi may publish it—as it is an award-winning book."

I happily accepted. He took out an inland letter from his desk and dictated something to me. This time when I returned from his office, I had with me a book of poetry.

I tried to read, but found it very difficult. I called a young girl as a tutor to help me in reading and could complete the first draft of translation in six months. Ayyappa Paniker never asked about the translation after that and when I phoned him he said that he was very busy then and that he could see the translation only in the month of April or May.

I got an appointment to meet him in the month of May. I could meet him at 2pm at his residence. Not knowing the exact distance, I reached the spot 10 minutes prior to the appointed time. I rang the doorbell but the door would open only after 10 minutes. Ayyappa Paniker told me, "I was serving food to my daughter, that was why I asked you to come at 2 pm." I found everything very strange in his home as though a storm was standing on the tip of his books. He introduced me to his wife and to his daughter Meena. He asked me to read the poems carefully; we continually worked for two hours, without any break or talk other than of poetry. At four o'clock he got up saying, I have to make tea for my daughter and wife; do you want to have tea? I said, "No sir, thanks" and came back.

To complete the revision on his poetry I had to go to his house for almost 18 days. I was very much impressed by his concentration. At the same time I was astonished to see his devotion to his family. His daughter was not too young, still she used to call now and then to her father, "acchaaa (papa)," and he immediately attended to her demands. His wife would either be taking bath or dozing on the sofa. She became friendly with me and talking to her, I came to know that Dr. Paniker made breakfast and cooked rice. Evening tea was also his duty. If the servant did not turn up, washing utensils was also his duty. These arrangements were due to the illness of his wife and daughter, as I could understand slowly.

I was very much touched by his love towards his daughter. His daughter was constantly dependent on him for her smallest needs, "Accha, which duppatta should I wear with this dress" or "which slipper must I put on." Sometimes she used to come and say, "Accha, I am thirsty," and Ayyappa Paniker would immediately get up to make tea for her.

The most surprising thing was that Ayyappa Paniker never complained about his wife's or daughter's behaviour. He was looking after both of them like a dutiful traditional "wife". He used to call his daughter with so much affection—Miyaan: (her name is Meena) as though he was singing "Miyaan ki Todi". I have never heard a father calling his daughter so lovingly. By the time I could finish the revision of his book, he asked me to phone if any doubts cropped up, but not between 6 and 9 in the morning, as he cooked breakfast then (Kerala breakfast is not an easy job as they have a variety of curries). After that he took his bath and then his breakfast. By the time he comes to his study room it would be 9 am. I was too shocked to know this, as I could not imagine that there was some one who never complained about his duties. He never wanted to talk about the problems in his family, so he accepted his duty saying, "See people go for walk, I work in the kitchen, and this gives me exercise. You know all the Rasas are in the kitchen, we take a lot from there to poetry." I must admit, at the end of this translation session I became his admirer.

After the book got ready, he told me, "Next time you go to see your mother in Delhi, go to Kedarnath Singhji too. He is my friend and he will let me know about your translations." Once he judged my translations from different sources, he loaded me with a number of works of other Malayalam writers. He made me translate Balamani Amma, Karoor, Thakazhi and others. I felt that he had found a translator in me and was utilizing me for Malayalam literature. This annoyed me at times. He kept on introducing me to big names of our times like Ashok Vajpeyi, Kedarnath Singh and Vishnu Khare. This habit was also becoming quite painful to me as none except Kedarnath Singh gave me any importance, as they might have taken me as just another product of Paniker's group. Once I complained to him about his habit of introducing me to big people, saying, "I am nobody in Hindi literature, how can they accept me without any background? When you introduce me to them, they get suspicious. So please do not introduce me to anyone."

He replied, "See, I am doing this for Malayalam literature, not for you."

I was shocked by his bluntness. But this was Ayyappa—some times very affectionate, sometimes very blunt.

People in Kerala know how difficult it is to go to Paniker's home and how difficult Paniker himself was. I could not go to his home after the translation of my first book. Time to time I was too disturbed by his strange behaviour. He was always loading me with translation work. He made me write a book on Balamani Amma, but he was also careful that my work should not go waste. As soon as my works got over, he used to pressurize concerned people to publish or to pay me. He had quite a few strange habits—he could call me any time, if he wanted me to do some work of translation of any Malayalam writer; but at the same time when I called him he would put down the phone saying, "*vilikyaam*" (I will call you). Sometimes he used to ask me, "Are you coming this side? I have to give you some material for translation." But once while passing through his way, I had gone to his home, he had refused to see me as he was very busy correcting the English translation of Karoor Neelkanta Pillai for Sahitya Akademi with the translator. I was extremely disappointed by his behaviour. He never got time to listen to my complaints. Ayyappa Paniker was always in a hurry, he did not have time to stop — *chareveti chareveti* – this little man was always working at home, in the office, in literature and out of literature.

There were a few things for which I will always miss him. Whenever I went out for any seminar or tour he would want me to inform him of each single detail about the function. He would give me some names and ask me to meet them; he never forgot to say *shubh yatra* except during his last days when I was coming to Kalady. Actually Ayyappa Paniker was a man of relationship. He has developed a number of relationships with a number of people. All relationships were different, from person to person. His relationship with Balamani Amma was a relationship of deity and devotee. He almost worshipped her. He himself had a number of admirers, both men and women. Each one has a different story to tell about the generosity showed by him towards them. He had sharp eyes to pick a proper person. I remember the release function of my book on *Atharvaveda*—that time, he was not well but he himself asked me to conduct the function. I asked him, "Sir! You are not well, so we can postpone." He said, "No problem, you arrange every thing; I will come there, even though I cannot speak" and went on to ask me about the speakers in the meeting. At last he suggested a strange name, "You should call a young teacher named Radhakrishnan, he is somewhere in the University." He knew him only by his first name, nothing more, and for me it was very difficult to find out such a personality. Ayyappa Paniker was quite sick by that time. Still he phoned me several times to ask, "Did you find out that young man?" I was too worried

as I could not disturb him by telling that I had failed in finding out that person. Luckily I could find out the man, he was a Lecturer in Malayalam in Sanskrit University. When I, talked over the phone to him, he was astonished, as he had never talked to Ayyappa Paniker before. He recalled how he had criticized the cover page of Paniker's book. Radhakrishnan is too shy a person but quite knowledgeable and the sharp eyes of Paniker could guage his capacity. There is no doubt that Radhakrishnan's speech was the best and well received in my function. I am sure Radhakrishnan will never forget Ayyappa in his life.

Ayyappa's relationships had a gentle face too, right from *Niitanne jiivitam sandhye, niitanne maranavum sandhye* (You are life, Sandhya, death too you are, it's you who grow dark, it's you who disappear, it's you it's you Sandhye!) to "Holiday Whispers",(Ozhivu kala samvadam) and *Poetry at Midnight* (*Pattumanippookal*)—Ayyappa was talking about very sweet relations and the pain accompanying those relationships. There is no doubt that he lived with those relations and they were with him till his death. A few days after his death, I got Colleen's (Paniker's Sandhya) phone number from a card carelessly kept inside my book. I called her and informed her of Paniker's death. She replied in a typical American style, "Oh I am sorry, did he have a heart attack?" I told her that he was sick for quite some time. She replied, "I am sorry, and thanks for informing me." Her voice did not have the sweetness of relationship, I could not tell her—O Sandhya, your sun has set, he has woven a golden dress of words for you, it is your fate that you could not wear this dress....No...No...now I understand those words were not for any particular relationship; those words were for all the relationships which grow in this world as flower or dawn. These words are for those relations which take birth in the heart of every man and woman—these words are from a saint who believed in human relationship more than in God. Ayyappa Paniker is not dead; he is not past tense, he is here in this world, in those poems, in those memories, in those sweet words that he gave us.

❑

The Poet Who Will Never Die

Damodar Mauzo

ManoharRai SarDesai, (1925-2006) who can easily be described as one of the most distinguished Indian poets of our times, began writing poetry at an early age. The atmosphere around him was conducive to writing as his father had already achieved fame as an eminent Marathi short story writer. However, his poetry flourished when he was persuing higher studies in France. He was conferred a Doctorate in Literature by the Sorbonne, Paris for his thesis was on "The image of India in France" where he was overwhelmed by strong feelings of nostalgia for his motherland. A stream of poems started flowing uninterruptedly, pulsating with a rhythm of its own and rich with colourful imagery. He sang of the lush green fields and the blue sea, of the softly singing birds and the whispering palm trees. Goa was then ruled over by the Portuguese. ManoharRai wrote intensely inspiring poetry that condemned colonialism and instilled patriotism.

ManoharRai's six years of stay in France and the subject of his thesis brought him in close contact with the writings of some of the luminaries of that country like Voltaire, Victor Hugo and Romain Roland. As he confesses he could learn and understand India better through the views of these great European scholars who had written extensively on India. He was also fascinated by the new trends in writings emerging in Europe. As he knew Portuguese, French and English he could relish the best of western literature. Pablo Neruda, Garcia Lorca, Paul Eluard, Albert Camus and many others were his favourites. While in France, he came in close contact with some great Indian painters like Laxman Pai, Raza, Paritosh Sen and Shakti Burman. He also interacted with French intellectuals who were opposed to colonialism which reaffirmed his faith in socialism and democracy and helped him to take intellectual and ideological positions.

ManoharRai SarDesai wrote extensively on topics varying from patriotism and socialism to love and romance. His poems can easily be categorized into several phases.

The first phase was that of nostalgic poetry. *Goyam Tujea Mogakhatir* (For the Sake of Thy Love, O Goa) is a collection that depicts the poet's wistful state of mind while he was in a far-off country. He is full of praise for the picturesque landscapes, murmurings of the springs and the waves of the Arabian sea washing the feet of his homeland, Goa.

The second phase is clearly full of patriotic songs. *Aiz Re Dholar Poddli Boddi* (The Drums Have Started Beating) and *Jai Punyabhu Jai Bharata* (Long Live the Holy-land of Bharat) are collections that sent a stern warning to the colonizers. He also dreamt of the bountiful fertility of the land of Goa' in his poems, as he said,

Faichea Goyant Ede nal'l,
Ani shetant tin pikam,
Faichem Goem mhunnttolem ga,
Ttumchi bhik amkam naka

Our palm trees will yield such big coconuts,
And the fields will produce three crops a year;
Tomorrow's Goa will refuse
To accept these alms of yours

The 450 years of an alien suppressive rule had turned its Goan subjects apathetic towards the freedom movement. SarDesai's poetry rekindled the fire of patriotic zeal in Goan society. Ram Manohar Lohia, on reading ManoharRai wrote, "Manohar possesses the lyrical quality of which good poetry is made. In the poems that I have read, this lyricism is coupled with patriotism..."

The third phase is an extension of the second one. Goa had been liberated from the clutches of foreign rule. However, Goa's independent identity faced a threat. The language of the soil was not getting its due recognition. ManoharRai wielded his pen fiercely to fight against the injustice meted out to his mother tongue. *Zayat Zage* is a representative collection of this phase. In this the poet gives a clarion call to the masses to beware of their oppressors who came in the guise of protectors.

Then comes a phase where the poet expresses his concern for the exploitation of the masses. But he found a novel way of tackling the exploiters and the unruly politicians. Poems like "Hi Lokshai" (This is

Democracy) were satires that ridiculed the wrongdoers leading to their demoralization.

In the next phase we find a new form of poetry invented by this poet. "Zayo-Zuyo" is a term used by the poet for this new form of poetry that is pithy but rich in content. Armando Menezes wrote, "Zayo-Zuyo" (Jasmines) is a precious little volume that is reminiscent, in its discontinuity and epigrammatic character, of Tagore's 'Stray Birds', but is otherwise original—and almost entirely Konkani. One cannot imagine it in any other language." Even a senior poet like B.B.Borkar once confessed that Manohar's new form of poetry inspired him to write similar poems. *Pissollim*, (Butterflies), his next collection also has similar poems. Veteran Marathi critic M.V. Rajadhyaksha in his review of *Pissollim* says "These short poems are of anything between two and seven lines each, comprising a thought or a fancy within those narrow limits. Such poems call for uncommon economy and precision of expression, the qualities ManoharRai SarDesai has in remarkable measure."

P. L. Deshpande praised the Konkani poet after reading *Pissollim*. He said, "To tell a story of sixty words in four words requires a 'mould' of imaginative power and a genius mind that can extract a small drop of essence out of a thousand experiences. The poet provides a vision to look at the ocean through the drops."

His poems were simple yet philosophically rich in content. Though ManoharRai did not believe in preaching, he had a definite philosophy of life that can be sensed and felt in his poems. He lived a peaceful and leisurely life taking difficult times in his stride. Some critics have called it a 'creative lethargy'. He loved to make the people around him happy. At difficult moments, he cracked jokes to ease the tension. He used to say, "Life is worth exactly what it costs. I pay what is my due and enjoy what I get."

ManoharRai SarDesai was a poet of all and sundry. He wrote with such simplicity that he could easily touch the hearts of the masses. The use of rustic and living language, simplicity of expression and artistic maneuvering, made his poems very popular across all sections of society in Goa and other Konkani regions. His poems inspired a number of young men and women to take to writing poetry. For a long time, one could see the influence of ManoharRai on these young poets. Such was the motivation that even young readers who had no literary background, from both the Hindu as well as Catholic communities, felt like giving expression to their emotions through verses. He thus came to be known as the poet of poets.

ManoharRai had a flair for punning. His mastery over languages

was so great that he could play authoritatively with words. 'Fenny is funny' is one such felicitous pun that comes to mind. He had a razor sharp memory. Quotes of famous intellectuals were on the tip of his tongue. He was a polyglot who could speak, read and write many languages. He wrote poems in French which were promptly hailed by the French.

Impressed by his genius, Jean-Luc Proffit wrote, "He likes to make things simple...To make the situation look simple, one has to SEE it as simple; and that, for sure, is not so simple...It requires a great talent and sharpness of observation." ManoharRai had a wit that kept his listeners glued to him. He could make complex things look so simple. Proffit narrates his experience thus:

> I remember how once he introduced the French Revolution. 'The root of the French Revolution is a root: potato; and the seed of the French Revolution is a seed: coffee, meaning 'café'. How could one better summarize the situation of eighteenth century France by relating both the nutrition, which allowed people to think further, and the turmoil of ideas symbolized by drinking coffee at the Paris Cafés?

However, the poet's greatest contribution to Konkani were his lyrics and rhymes written for children. The crow, the frog, the cock, the fish and all the animals became the characters of his rhymes and children lapped them up. He loved to be with children. He told them tales and jokes, rendered rhymes and songs for them, played the mouth-organ, showed some magic tricks that he had mastered and even played games with them. He lived to see the rhymes written by him becoming folksongs in his lifetime.

Recipient of Sahitya Akademi Award in 1980 for his collection, *Pissollim*, he went on to earn many more national and international laurels. Goa State Kala Academy Award, Highest State level Gomant Sharada Puraskar, Rashtriya Hindi Academy's Satvahan Award and The French Award Palmes Academiques are some of them.

The death of ManoharRai is a great blow to the world of Konkani literature, though I firmly believe that he will not only live on in the hearts of the thousands of his admiring students in Goa's Chowgule College and Goa University where he headed the Chair of French, but will rule over the hearts of all Goans forever.

❑

Gulzar

Scars

Fresh News

Fresh news
Like fresh vegetables for the day's consumption
Served on the newspaper's front page.
Eighteen corpses of shepherds
In Doda district, shot by terrorists
And left out in the sun
Where the sunflowers bloomed in rows

It's been happening for fifty years
This fresh news

In Orissa
Floods have submerged fifty villages
The water leaps against their chins
Hordes of villagers converge to higher ground
balancing utensils, children, whatever seemed essential
And the water rises even higher
On the roofs are perched the old, the invalid
Shooing away the kites and vultures hovering over their heads

This took place two years ago
And it happened ten years ago as well
As old as poverty, is the news
Fresh news

There has been a fire near Chennai
Some mentally ill patients, chained to their hospital beds

All twenty nine charred alive
Looked like figurines etched in coal
Kept in Pompei's Museum
Those were buried in lava
In the eighth century
Fresh news! I watch it twice a day

Translated from Urdu by Devina Dutt

As They Ran

The skin beneath their heels
Had begun to harden
As they ran and ran

Gunshots went off in the lanes
Like stars bursting over Kabul
Balls of fire exploded like suns
Blowing off houses

"Allah, Allah," Abbu croaked once more
"Keep running—keep running."

This time though, Mehmood freed his hand
Pulled out his *ghulel* from beneath his shirt
Defiantly, to ask
"Abbu who's side is Allah after all
On their side or with me?"

Translated from Urdu by Devina Dutt

Naxalite

Stopping at the corner he turned to look into the lane
He looked handsome in the moonlight

A few measured steps and he stopped at her door
Raised his hand to knock

Just then she had opened the door
No one there
In the desolate lane

She turned back
Lay on that cot in the courtyard
Still dreaming

Just four days ago from this same cot
The police had taken him away in the dead of night
A Naxalite—that's what they'd called him

Translated from Urdu by Devina Dutt

Riots 1

The fervent gathering of an angry crowd boils over
The fervent gathering of angry crowds
Some descended from minarets and some from ledges
Some leapt over staircases and pushed aside walls
Some heard the *azaan* and rushed out
The others took their cue from the clanging of bells
Crazed anger in their eyes
All gathered in no time at the crossing of lanes
Both sides resolute
Looking to strike
The weapons of their faith
The verdict is out
Stone the other's God to death

Translated from Urdu by Devina Dutt

Riots 4

He had had no say in his choice of faith
His faith was inherited from his parents
To choose one's parents, how is that ever possible?

Had his home been of his asking?
Or was the land of his birth chosen by him?

He was just nine
Why then, was he killed in communal riots?

Translated from Urdu by Devina Dutt

Now Don't You Worry About Khanam, Abbu

Don't you worry about Khanam anymore, Abbu.
The sleeping pills have been stopped
The medication is over

You know how scared she was in the nights
Saw visions of flying tents in the sky
Holding on to the wall she would say
"Stop, stop, the house is walking away"
No more of that frenzy now

The tank had suddenly entered our home
That was on the night of Friday prayers
Whatever we found, bits and pieces of her, we buried
Now don't go worrying about Khanam anymore, Abbu.

Translated from Urdu by Devina Dutt

Riots 6

Nobody was killed in the city
Those were just names which were killed
Nobody cut off anybody's head anywhere
Some people had just chopped off caps, headscarves with heads in them
And this stream of blood you see on the streets

It was only spilt from where the voices had been slashed aside.

Translated from Urdu by Devina Dutt

Newspaper

I remained stained with blood all day
All day that blood continues to dry and turns black
A crisp film forms
Continuous scratching with the nails
Makes my skin peel
That awful stench of raw blood
Sticks by me
And clothes covered with black patches

Each morning the newspaper arrives at my home
Soaked in blood

Translated from Urdu by Devina Dutt

Tapi

Foam at its banks, the river pants
The Tapi has cholera
The night-long riots and killings in the city
Have slipped through drains and gone straight into its stomach
All night the smell of burnt flesh
Has spread like a vile acid
All night it has thrown up poison
The Tapi is struck with cholera

Translated from Urdu by Devina Dutt

Backlight of the Sun

In the backlight of the sun
Among the ruins of houses
Afghan children are perched on walls.
They look alive

On the cover page of the American Art Journal

Smoke wafts slowly

Translated from Urdu by Devina Dutt

The Bird

Flying away from the fan she perches on the bulb
Snaps her neck smartly in the mirror
This chit of a sparrow
Its chatter fills the room
It keeps me from listening to the news

So many have seen their homes razed
Turned into heaps of debris in Gujarat
And this one
Is taken up with adding fresh straws to its nest

Translated from Urdu by Devina Dutt

Gujarat

Boils have broken out on the whole body
Hands scratch at the legs
The feet are trying to rub against the neck
The neck is stuck in the head
And wild cacti grows out of it

The poison ivy of religion has left a fearful itch in its wake
The boils begin to burst
The foul liquid begins to ooze

Translated from Urdu by Devina Dutt

Taller Than Two Hundred Feet this Mushroom

This mushroom is higher than two hundred feet
Twisting, spiralling
It carries on its head a dense black umbrella
Of slowly unfurling smoke
All this emerged from the innards of a small bomb
And spread over all Kandahar
Daylight quickly plunged the city into night

In times to come
When a grandmother narrates the horrors of today
Children will take that too for a story
shut their eyes and sleep

Translated from Urdu by Devina Dutt

Words

A few words exploded on paper
Some smoke, a few sparks
And another poem caught the flame

Sitting in the burning city what more can the poet do
Words cannot put out any fire
Poems never filled any scars

Translated from Urdu by Devina Dutt

Baghdad

War debris piles up
For the first time
Have I seen so many arms, legs, hands, head and feet
Scattered around
They look like left over tools
Spare parts

An arm, from a weaver, shakes still
Perhaps spinning the yarn yet,
This leg was a player's for sure
he was run out, killed as he ran homeward

This head rolls over
Remnants of poems rattle in it
Poems which have begun to unravel at the seams
The fingers are straining
It seems, to inscribe this date in the dirt

Each part was removed by the mechanic
looking to mend their faults
He had disliked the din they made
Had dismantled them
And so had found a way to end their clamour

Translated from Urdu by Devina Dutt

The Riots

The riots are passing by this street
In a wild burst of noise

Such boisterous fun
Just like those Republic Day parades
They are jubilant as they torch buses
Shouting slogans together

Not a trace of sadness or anger
As if their team had just won the World Cup
And is making its triumphant way home

Translated from Urdu by Devina Dutt

❑

Karabi Deka Hazarika

Don't Plait Your Hair, Yagnasheni

Don't plait your hair, Yagnasheni
Let the dragon cloud of your hair
Spread across the sky,
Hide the sun, moon and the stars
Yagnasheni, don't plait your hair.
O you, the one born of fire
Hold in your eyes pregnant with fire
The arrow head of the disaster-flame,
Let them shed sparks, not tears.
Later when you bind
Your disordered hair
Interweave it into a dragon's tail
Not now Yagnasheni,
Don't plait your hair.
To smear with blood
Your rough and disordered hair
Wasn't it your swearing?
The Panchajanya is not blowing
The Devadatta is not ringing
May be the right moment
Is yet to come
For the destruction of the Kauravas.
The wretched wife
Let down by the Five Pandavas, who
Hide their cowardice and shame
Under the shadow of your hair.
Dharmaputra is ruled by scruples

Partha disguises as Brihannala
Brave Brikodar
Is engrossed in what he feeds on.
And the sons of Madri?
Just don't remember them
They are yet so tender
The thought of blood might scare them away.
Yagnasheni, you need no help
Let a storm burst
In the dark cloud of your hair,
Let thunder roar
Lightning strike and burn
The gold palace of Hastinapur.
Your thirst for blood
Is crawling across our breasts
Let Duhshasan's blood
Freely flow and congeal into the dust.
We have endured
Enough of pain and humiliation
Many a principle
Has ended up in tyranny
And now it is time
Our rivers took a reverse course
Yagnasheni
Merry-making is wafting from the Kaurava quarters
In the palace of a blind king
The game of hope
Is the game of death.

We have endured long enough
Being pawns of the cowardly husbands
Now is the time to repay
The bloody ritual
Of smearing dishevelled hair with blood.
We shall smear together
Our dragon pigtails with blood
Don't plait your hair now
Yagnasheni.

Translated from Assamese by Ananda Bormudoi

Blue Firefly

Blue firefly...hiding quietly...! I don't know how..
inside my basket full of jewelleries.
So well mixed with the heap of bangles, rings and gems,
That I failed to see it first.
Just like that the day passed.

With the coming of dusk, it started glowing bright
...the blue firefly...By midnight sparkling as if a blue diamond star.
The darkness got startled...
and stupefied marched out through my window.

With motions easy and soothing
The firefly glided up and down.
In the air spread blue snow flakes...
Can neither sit, nor sleep...strange night!

Saw in the mirror, my eyes, lips, hair
All slowly turning blue.
I wonder what people will say
When they will see me tomorrow....

They all will know
that deep down my soul there lies a blue firefly!

Translated from Assamese by Kaustubh Deka

❑

K L Chowdhury

After You Left

1

Till you arrived
there was this intense desire
to meet with you
before the unknown caught with us,
a longing that had snowballed with time
since we were last together,
a desire to thaw
and deluge you with ourselves.

You gave us just two weeks
for an absence of as many years,
and what a melting away it was—
of time, of us—
as we hurriedly unravelled ourselves
during that intense ethereal existence
in the hypnotic trance of your presence.

That monsoon shower of your love
revived our drought-stricken selves.
We forgot who and what we were
in our total surrender
to your being near.

Then you left
and it was like a concussion
that jolted us
out of the amnesia of ourselves

and landed us
into an amnesia of your visit

2

The stunning from that bolt of separation
has eased,
the amnesia that gripped us for quite sometime
has melted away,
there is a rush of memories now
like a crowd trying to jostle
out of a crowded space.

But we are in no hurry,
we will let them out one by one
to amuse us for the rest of time,
till we meet again.

3

For quite sometime we wondered
why the amnesia for your visit,
only to see the reason
as the fog started to evaporate.

Just as sweet goes with the sour in life
so also the pain of your separation
took the pleasure of our reunion along,
into the black hole of amnesia,
and all we were left with was a vacuum,
even a negation of your visit.

Yet, that denial could not last long
for time stood still
forcing us to look back
for a second look
of the time you spent with us.

It is that second look we are having

as we gingerly traverse
the forgotten territory again.

4

Your visit was short,
effervescent and intense,
so much packed with essence
and there is so much you have left behind
that it will take us quite some time
to gather and take in.

Memories are hazy at present
and it is difficult to say
if we have woken up from a dream
or if we have started dreaming.
But a dreamy feeling is there
all the same all the time.

The lawns and the flowerbeds are deserted,
the guava tree
under the shade of which the kids played
and spent most of their time
is in the throes of separation,
its boughs that made a swing for them
are aching for their touch,
the guavas refuse to mellow.

The birds come here askance
for their new little friends,
they refuse to have their bath,
they deny themselves the grain.

There is no speech here, only your echoes,
there are no tasks for us, save reflections,
there is no music but your melody,
there are no smells sans your sweet fragrances.

There is you and you everywhere
and ours is a story of dissolution.

5

We treasure more than anything else
the vast treasure you left behind.
We dare not open or flaunt it at once
lest it dazzles us into arrogance
or catches an evil eye.

It is a treasure to treasure,
to last us till we meet again
and till then to savour like old wine,
in small sips and slow draughts
that neither inebriates nor leaves me sober
but lends that gentle intoxication
that fakirs wallow in.

6

It was a sacrilege
to make the beds you slept in,
to tidy up the room you lived in,
to give order to the disorder of departure,
for there we sought your living touch
that made us feel
you were still around.
Yet, weeks later
when we spruced and tidied up,
what a blessing to find
little relics of your visit,
your left-over presence,
a treasure trove of objects—
a frock here, a sock there,
kids scribbles,
drawings and crayon paintings,
pens, pencils, pebbles,
chewing gums and chocolates—
that are now our amulets and charms.

The miniature temple in the lawn
that the kids so assiduously built

with marbles, pebbles and stones
is now a daily pilgrimage.
There, we watch Siva's Tandava,
there we hear the flute of Krishna.

7

We rewind time and play it back
trying to take in each moment
now magnified in detail,

We playback time
and let it go in slow motion
or freeze it when we will
to have your fill.

Your memories have now become
the very current of our lives.

Laksmisree Banerjee

Lakshman Rekha

Why did Sita cross the Lakshman-Rekha
(or did she trip over it?)
between life and death,
that shrouded secrecy
between light and darkness—

that ultra-thin divide
between faith and longing—
that muslin-veil between
appearance and reality?

Why did she pierce through
that cryptic, crystalline wall
stretching endlessly between good and evil
to meet her abductor half way?
To pursue a golden deer
through an endless mesh of verdure,
through tunnels of silenced shrieks?

Why did Sita throw herself away
to the winds and the deserts?
To the skies and the rivers?
Rend apart her heart in glassy schisms—
trample upon her own jewels, her own creations,
her own crown of flowers?

Leave behind her own garden,
her own home, her own *aangan*—
wrench in distressed pieces her own dreams, desires,

drapings, sarees, *ghunghat* in wreathed agonies,
show the fearful fissures engulfing her own self
in the grand finale of fire and tears—

Was it to punish Ravana
or Rama?

Moon-Spindles of Singhbhum

Weaving cane baskets
darning rags
making coconut-brooms
sun-drying dung cakes
for stoking half-dead fires
wrapping up crack'd huts
with muddy slime
along denuded roads
is what they know of
as destiny....

the dented coal-tar
the beaten corn
the wheat in meagre spread-outs
on the margins of highways
compose their lives....

their nude children
progenies of darkness
kick on the outskirts
away from life, light
or digital development....

their black burnish'd bodies
marvellous oily statuettes
used for hard sun-burnt labour
picking up firewood
or dry, half-rotten fruits
in deep, pachyderm-infested jungles....

for back-breaking chores
in devastated fields, farms or homes
for leasing themselves out
to lazy, lascivious males,
owners or husbands
in liquor-stupor.

The moon steadily blinks
on these tired horizons
of Singhbhum or Simlipal
of Bethla or Bamnipal
yarning her stories
on an eternal spindle.

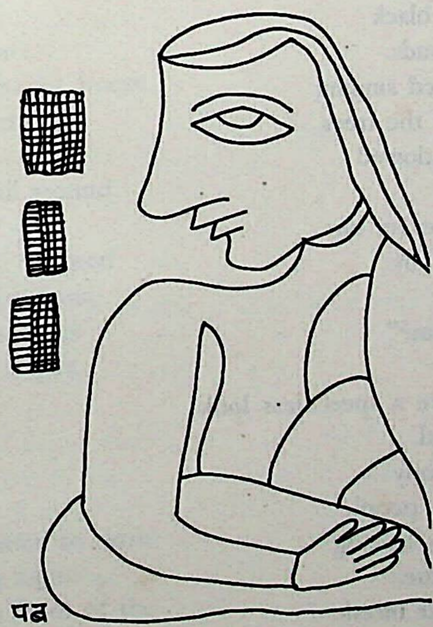
At the Glistening Edge

The veil'd hue of my organza
Ghunghat,
The muted sheen of my nail enamels,
Lipsticks,
No longer lure me to your shadow'd
Enclave....
My sharp, kohl'd eyes have dimmed with
The colours of life
While the soft scents of my bosom,
The undertones
Of my tinkering *ghungroos* have
Died down
And my dark, cloudy curls tonsured
To accommodate
This new life of explosion, expansion and extinction.

Your sapphire skies, emerald seas,
Incandescent butterflies, energizing breeze,
Aromatic flowers, blinking glow-worms
Circulate,
Activate
On the periphery of the penultimate zone
Far away
From prayer

From faith
From benediction
From hope
From hopelessness.

The dull horizon stretches out
To the thin films of the deepening night,
The hide and seek sunrays peep
At the glistening edge:
I wait while life goes on...
I wait, as always, for the answer
As always, one thumb away from my clutch.



Sujata Chaudhry

Malika-I

One melancholy morning
after all of them
left the house one by one,
she sat on the floor,
alone, in the living room
to chat with the doormat.
The sun has just sunk
behind the deep black
mountains of clouds.
Birds have stopped singing
and dancing atop the trees.
The house is shadowed
with darkness.
She questioned "every day
you are trampled by
many a foot,
don't you feel pain?"

The doormat gave a speechless look.
A moment passed.
It replied "My body
bleeds every time people
trample upon me, leaving
dirt to settle on me.
But my soul never bleeds
it remains untouched.
But O! My dear!
Your body and soul both bleed,
when those two feet walk

all over you again and again
leaving dirt to settle on you till eternity.
His stony words and merciless speech
leave deep scars on your body and soul.
I can see pain writ large on you—
your eyes, face and deep in the heart.
I am a doormat, you are Malika
I am an inert object, you are a human being
Yet, you have become
a lifeless object in his hands
much before throwing me
into the garbage bin, one day
he might throw you out of this house,
out of his life by signing on a
piece of white paper.
Have you ever thought about this?"

Malika had no reply.
Minutes passed.
The door bell rang.
She opened the door.
Her son walked into the house
wiping away his dirty feet
on the doormat.
There was silence all around.
Yet Malika heard
the words 'divorce' 'divorce'
coming from all directions,
hitting her body and soul
ceaselessly and mercilessly.

Malika-2

She works from dawn to dusk
from dusk into the night,
lights the candle in front of the
tulsi tree, offers prayers to
Ganpati, goes to the temples
on Tuesdays, foregoes meals
on Thursdays and Fridays,

cooks the best recipes,
feeds all to their
heart's content
washes clothes, cleans utensils
day and night, makes home
a paradise on earth.
They call her a cipher
a zero, not the golden one of course.

She is less than the least,
the lone 'one' that cannot make 'ten'
leave alone 'millions'.
She cannot discuss,
she cannot decide,
she cannot give orders or advice.

No one pays her any attention.
So what, if a heart is broken?
Hearts have been made
but to be broken.

Yet she glows
in a strange radiance,
the radiance of motherhood.
Quietly and patiently
rising above distress,
illness, grief and loneliness,
herself remaining a zero
her children she shapes as heroes.

Malika-3

Today is the fourth day
in her new home.
She is yet to adjust
to the new surroundings,
new people, and new life.
The house is packed
with strangers.
Suddenly a male voice whispers
"the food was not good

for the baratis"
She lifts the veil.
It is the father-in-law.
A female voice says 'yes'
And adds "her ornaments
are light weighted"
It is the mother-in-law.
Another voice continues,
"She is very dark
and not so good looking."
It is the sister-in-law.

And during the night
when the musky moon
happily dances with the stars
and stops to converse with the floating clouds,
on the chest of the sky,
Malika's dreams are shattered,
when a heavily drugged husband,
babbles, repeatedly
into her ear:
"I am the master
you are a slave
I will dictate
and you shall obey."

Two drops of tears
roll down Malika's eyes
(to be followed by many more
in the years to come)
as her universe disappears
in total darkness.
The full moon of happiness
vanishes from her life's sky
along with the dreamy stars

And in not so distant a land,
in a tiny house,
the story of yet another
hapless young bride begins!

❑

Ascent Heavenwards

Chaganti Tulasi

On that day, an awful row broke out between Poli and her husband Appala Kondayya. She rushed to the hut in high spirits. But, as soon as she stepped in, he began to spit fire.

She thought that he too would be as much elated as she was. She couldn't imagine that he would kick up a row in that way.

He burst out in anger, "Can't afford even gruel. Look at her purchase! Good-for-nothing woman! Wretch!" Stamping his foot furiously, he bellowed.

"I didn't pay cash for this purchase. How can I make cash payment? Do I have any money? Hardly a penny. I'm penniless and so are you. We simply can't buy it in our life time. Somehow or other, it just happened for our benefit. Pedda Ammagaru said that a rupee will be deducted per month. So I bought it. It can be paid off within ten months." Poli tried to give the details.

However, Appala Kondayya didn't stop hurling abuses. As a matter of fact, he returned to the hut in a nasty mood. He left the hut at daybreak and returned now. He went around in town till he was tired. But no work.

"Damn it! Whose inauspicious face" have I seen? Didn't get even a tobacco leaf. I was ready to work but none hired me."

Having failed to get any work and having failed to get at least some tobacco, he returned home late in the evening, in a famished condition. The wife went out to wash the dishes at a Brahmin household. He searched each and every clay pot and pan. Nothing. It seemed as if Poli didn't even make the fire. He began to brood—who knows whether she would light the stove tonight at least and cook something? Heaving a sigh, he squatted down listlessly on the verandah and leaned on the wooden pillar. Poli arrived with her son astride at her waist. She was carrying

on her head a bright aluminum pot cushioned on a piece of coiled cloth.

She laid down the son on the verandah and set aside the pot. Immediately Appala Kondayya picked up a quarrel.

On that day Parvatamma called in a hawker quite casually. She wanted to drive a hard bargain with that hawker who was bartering aluminum-ware and plastic-ware in exchange for used clothes. Her intention was to get a nice article in exchange for her own two sarees and three trousers of her husband. However, the hawker, a North-Indian woman, went on saying in a high-pitched voice and with exaggerated gestures that the clothes shown by Parvatamma were almost worthless. At long last, she agreed to give an aluminum pot but demanded one more saree. Quite reluctantly Parvatamma tossed in another saree and received the pot. She did so only because she liked the pot very much.

Yet, she was very upset when her husband came back from his office and her mother-in-law from attending a religious discourse. They both simultaneously ridiculed and scolded her saying, "Bought an aluminum pot! Shame! Disgrace! And you are thrilled as if it were a stainless steel pot and bought it!"

Therefore she tried to persuade Poli, "Those old clothes are worth at least ten rupees. I will take one rupee a month from your pay. Take the pot for ten rupees." Parvatamma was eager to get as much money as she could.

Poli's joy knew no bounds. In high spirits, she came home with the pot. Immediately, a high row broke out.

Of course, Poli went on answering back to Appala Kondayya. "What are you talking about? This is my will and pleasure. I bought it with my own hard-earned money. Good Heavens! Why are you wailing as though I squandered your money? Have I ever pestered you to buy a pot? Have I ever told you that I'm in need of a pot? I bought it on the spur of the moment. One must weep if money is wasted on an outsider. For our own home I bought this pot."

Narsayya heard the noisy quarrel. He noticed the mounting rage in the tone of Poli who was in full frenzy and answering back to her husband. What is this quarrel for? The old man and woman (his parents) went away to live separately. Thus wondering, he rushed into their hut.

"What's the matter, Appala Kondayya? What happened to Poli?" When Narsayya came in with the intention of settling their quarrel, Poli and Appala Kondayya calmed down. To have a third person raising an

accusing finger at them was an insult to them. Their attitude was that he may be an elderly person, yet he has no right to poke his nose into their private life.

"Nothing", "Oh! It's nothing," said each one of them. Narsayya cursed himself for being foolish enough to intervene in a quarrel between a man and his wife. So he hung his head and left.

After Narsayya's departure, Poli looked at her husband intently. She realized that he was starving. Wondered whether he had taken at least tea. She understood the reason for his anger and quarreling. This anguished her greatly. She laid the child on a threadbare cloth spread on the floor. She put a pot on the wooden stove in order to heat water.

Went on brooding—what a wretched life! We are unable to have even gruel! So much suffering! None of the gods and goddesses is taking pity. Of course, at present, we are only three. Me, my husband and our child. Until the other day, the entire family used to live under one roof. The father-in-law, mother-in-law and brother-in-law and we—all of us stayed together. We were starving. Unable to bear the pangs of hunger, the old man used to wail, "I wish I were dead. Death is better than this hellish torment." The old woman used to say, "Who knows what we did in other lives? Is it that easy to lose one's life? Will He summon us at all?" Hunger! In addition to it, daily quarrels! Having observed this day after day, the brother-in-law moved out along with parents. God alone knows what was on his mind. He said that he would look after them. Now there are fewer members in the family. But, what is the use? My husband has no work. We go on starving."

She got the lukewarm water ready and called her husband. She cooked gruel with coarse pieces of rice brought from Parvatamma's house and thought—the truth must be admitted. Parvatamma gives me some course grits of rice whenever I clean rice. She is kind-hearted. Appala Kondayya calmed down. He had a wash with the tepid water. Sat down in the doorway and began to gobble the gruel from the clay pan noisily.

Poli was sitting leaning against the wooden post and nursing the child.

The circular shapes etched on the pot were glittering like silver coins.

"Tell the truth. Is this pot necessary for us?" Appala Kondayya asked his wife gently.

"I have been hankering after it for a long time. Parvatamma wanted to give away and so I took it." Poli told her husband much more gently.

Poli loved her husband deeply. Appala Kondayya also loved her deeply. Had they been rich, their love would have come to the notice of all as an ideal love.

"I have been hoping that Parvatamma would speak to her husband about me and get a job for me. But she never raises this topic."

"I also requested her. Daily I request her. The master says, 'He needn't come. I myself shall inform if any vacancy arises.' They say, "He needn't hang around our house at the cost of his daily earnings."

"Earnings! My foot! Today I didn't find any work."

"Other fellow-labourers run cycle rickshaws and make a living."

"Couldn't manage to get a rickshaw. Owning rickshaw is impossible. I have failed in even hiring one."

"I heard that rickshaws are being distributed. It seems loans are being given by banks. Alas! We don't get anything!"

"How can we? Without the patronage of some V.I.P. nothing is available. Who is going to call me on his own and give it to me? My case has to be recommended. How about requesting Parvatamma's husband?"

"If it were possible, he would have done it by now."

"Yes. You are right. We are destined to suffer like this. What can anybody do?"

Venkatasamy arrived and greeted Appala Kondayya.

"All the huts of our folks in the low-lying area were demolished," he informed.

"What? The low-lying area?"

"Yes. That's it. It seems Sendiri and her kids were awake all night by the roadside. None had a morsel of food. Today, they came over here with all their belongings."

"Sendiri and her kids! In that case, what about my folks? My parents and brother shifted to that street!"

"I heard that the bulldozer didn't come up to your father's house. Your people escaped. Our locality is also under the threat of demolition. I don't know what to do, where to go."

"What did we do? Why do they demolish our huts?"

"They are leveling the ground. Instead of that, if they run the bulldozer over us, this misery will end. Then we needn't die daily."

"Well said, Venkatasamy! It's better to die. We shall go to Heaven," said Poli.

"What makes you think so? Heaven after death! Heaven for folks like us!" Appala Kondayya commented.

"What are we enjoying? Tell me. Our life itself is hell."

"I just can't understand it. You explain. Our houses are nothing but huts sitting on the riverbank. Why do they destroy these? Why should the rich indulge in such an activity?"

"Our huts are ugly for them."

"If so, let them build two-story buildings for us."

"We can't afford gruel and you want two-story buildings, dear!" said Poli.

"No, I'm not asking for a two-storey building. I said so only because they consider these huts to be ugly and repulsive."

"They say that our huts are causing them acute suffering like ulcers."

"They are bulldozing the huts just like a doctor removes the ulcers surgically," said Venkatasamy.

Mallu stormed in looking as if he were possessed by a spirit. He came in looking for Venkatasamy. He too came from that street in the low lying area. His adolescent blood was boiling. Whenever a rally was organized, he also joined it waving a flag like the rest. He knew by rote what the organizers of the rallies would holler.

"These are all cancerous growths. They grow repeatedly from the same spot on which operation is done. To check their recurring growth, their base should be slashed. They do not originate from the huts, but from those tall buildings. The skyscrapers! They ought to be wiped out instead of these huts. Those tall buildings are to be pulled down. Should be leveled to the ground. Then only the cancerous growths stop recurring."

"Don't shout unnecessarily. This isn't a meeting. Not even a rally. You are highly keyed-up," said Venkatasamy.

"We may get keyed-up, or we may keep numb. It makes no difference. Our lives won't change.

"What sin have we committed? In which life?" said Poli.

"There's no work. No gruel. If we lose the hut too..."

"Don't think that we will keep quiet," said Mallu and was about to say something more.

Venkatasamy got up saying, "The sky is overcast. Cool wind is blowing. You better sleep now. Tomorrow, early in the morning, let us go to the most influential person of this locality and tell him." Along with him Mallu also got up.

"Venkatasamy! I forgot to tell you something. Look at this pot," said Poli.

"Brand-new one?"

"Yes. Can you tell the price?"

"Seventeen or eighteen."

"Then, it's a bargain!" commented Appala Kondayya.

"You complain about lack of work and lack of gruel. If so, how could you buy an aluminum pot? Hope you haven't stolen," Venkatasamy enquired.

"Shut up! I am not that mean. I don't do anything bad. We have been starving, but never stooped to stealing. I won't ever. Parvatamma gave it to Poli. Each month she is going to cut one rupee from Poli's salary until is settled. Gave it just for ten rupees."

"Only ten rupees? Picked up cheap!" remarked Venkatasamy.

"That woman must be deriving some kind of benefit from this. Otherwise, why would she give away? They tend to count each and every grain of cooked rice," commented Mallu.

"She's very kind," said Poli.

"Don't tell me that. I know how kind they are!" said Mallu, getting up to leave. A blast of nippy wind whizzed past.

"Look! Lashing wind! Move out! Hurry up!" Venkatasamy and Mallu left.

A high wind blew and put out the kerosene lamp. Appala Kondayya closed the door. Pressing the two door panels hard, he bolted.

Poli lit the lamp once again and said, "It's going to rain cats and dogs."

"If it rains, tomorrow also no work, no income."

"What's the use of worrying? Whatever will be will be. Go to bed now."

"Hope father and others are all right."

"Go to them early in the morning, tomorrow. You better sleep now," advised Poli.

Lying beside her son, tucking him up with the loose end of her saree, she nestled against him.

Appala Kondayya covered himself with a gunny bag and curled up.

The hut was swaying due to the impact of high winds as well as torrential rain. The rain water was making its way down through gaps in the palm-leaf roof. The lamp went off quickly.

"Appala Kondayya! Wake up! Poli! Poli! Wake up! Floods! Flood water! All are awake. They are running away. Why are you sleeping like a log? Flee! Floods!" Somebody was banging at the door. Appala Kondayya was startled and woke up.

He opened the door. But, what was there to see? All the people of the entire street were fleeing. The young and the old, carrying their belongings on the head, were running in the darkness. Lashing wind. Due to darkness, it was not clearly visible. He rubbed his eyes. When he fully grasped the situation, shivers went down his spine.

"Good God! Oh my God!"

"Poli! Poli!" He called. By then, she already got up and came to

the doorway. She wasn't aware of the flood at all. She was only conscious of the high wind and heavy downpour. She lit the lamp.

"Floods! Poli! Floods! Let's go. Come on. Quick. Fetch all our goods. Throw them outside the hut. Just look at the people! They're legging it!" Highly frightened and agitated Appala Kondayya caught hold of whatever articles he could lay his hands on and dumped them in the street. While she was handing over the things, he was carrying them out in a flash—pots and pans, tins and cans, winnow and broomstick, a straight cot etc. They both bundled up their belongings.

"Move out! Be quick! Hurry up! Run!" said he, panting. He placed the upturned string-cot on his head. Then put all the goods along with the tin trunk on it.

"Hold the child. I'll rush in to the hut just to verify if anything is left out."

"Nothing else is there. Come on! Run!" he took the boy into his arms.

"Alas! The aluminum pot! Brand new pot! It is left behind!"

"To hell with it. Run! Run! Is it more important than your life? Run!" Appala Kondayya began to run fast.

He ran without turning back, oblivious of everything else. Ran helter-skelter through the wind, rain and darkness. In utter panic, stumbling and straightening up, went on and on till he was out of breath.

"Poli! Take the child," saying so he turned around. She wasn't there.

Shouting at the top of his voice "Poli! Poli!" He was about to turn back.

"She'll come. But if you go back now, you can't return," saying so others shoved him forward.

Appala Kondayya thought that she must be somewhere among the running crowd or she might have gone even ahead of him.

Jostling, trampling, shoving, ramming, pressing one another and searching for their own kith and kin, they all surged towards the mansion situated on a very high ground and gathered there. However, Appala Kondayya couldn't find his wife there. He went on asking one and all like a lunatic, "Have you seen Poli? Have you seen Poli?"

He has been hearing about the river's tendency to have flash floods. But, this was his first experience of floods. Despite the talk of elders, never had he given any thought to the possibility of floods. The riverbank was full of huts—only huts. Never had the hut-dwellers run away from the river fearing it. On the other hand, they have been dreading demolition by a bulldozer and have been discussing how to face that situation. They

never thought, even in their wildest dreams, that the river would hound them.

Appala Kondayya couldn't find Poli. "She must have taken shelter in some other house," said others.

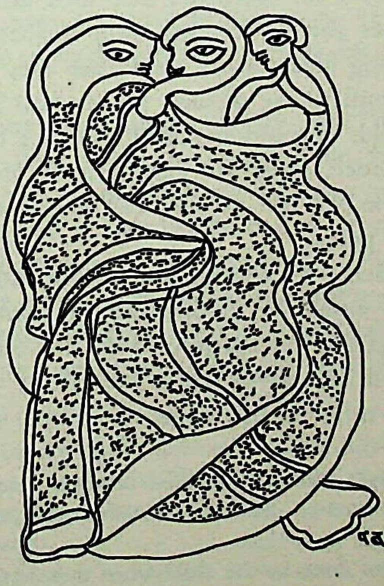
"I thought that she would follow close behind me! She said that the aluminum pot, brand new one, was left behind. Doesn't matter. Run, I told her. I was under the impression that she was also fleeing. Oh God! Poli rushed into the hut! Most probably, didn't come out at all!" Appala Kondayya broke down and began to weep like a woman.

Venkatasamy, Narsayya, and Mallu were not able to console him. "Calm down. Please. We don't know what has actually happened. Mallu will go to find out. You calm down."

Venkatasamy's wife took the child into her arms.

Translated from Telugu by U. Anuradha

❑



Geetul

Laxmanrao Sardessai

Her name is Geeta. I call her Geetul. She is my grand-daughter. My daughter, Suman's child. Suman calls me—*Kaka*[1], So she has taught Geetul to call me—*Kaka Aajjo*[2]. This name she has shortened in her rather cute and newly acquired spoken tongue to—*Tatajjo*[3] and started calling me that.

Geetul is not yet two and a half but she has started speaking. Stumbling and hesitating in her speech, she is a very sweet child. Anyone at first sight would love to sweep her into their arms and shower their love on her. Her eyes always twinkling with laughter add charm to her talkative manner. Long black lashes shade her eyes Jet black eyebrows, a wide forehead complete the picture. Suman had looked just like this when she was a child, fair and beautiful. Suman's chin was more oval. Geetul's slightly rounded. Both had curly hair. If you tied Geetul's long hair with a ribbon on the top of her head, she would look exactly like a Sikh boy with a patka.

Smiling to herself, eyes shining brightly she looks across at me and then comes over. I would be involved in my writing. A story would have come to me in its full imagery. With her tiny hands she would tug at my free hand and say--*Tatajjo Bhurr*[4]...

I get up. My mind is no longer interested in the writing. As I

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1. *Kaka*: Used to denote father, also used to mean uncle.
2. *Kaka Ajjo*: Ajjo is used to denote Grandfather, the prefix of Kakko is used to identify a specific individual.
3. *Tatajjo*: A corruption done by the child when it is just learning to speak and combines two words: Kaka Ajjo. Unable to pronounce 'K' she uses 'T' and hence 'Tatajjo'.
4. *Bhurr*: In colloquial Konkani means to go outside the house for fun. Used mostly by a child when it is just learning to speak, in its newly learnt language.

walk slowly taking measured steps, Geetul rushes inside. Getting her mother to put on her boots she runs back, grasps my finger and pulling me to the door, she says—*Thati*[5]. From the corner she picks up the umbrella, and then lifting her dainty hands asks in her loving voice—*Dhatta?*[6]

As I pick her up, she is overjoyed and claps her hands, hums a tune to herself, and joyfully compliments me—*Tatajjo Bayoch..!*[7] While saying this she caresses my face with her open palms. And then with her rose red lips plants a huge kiss on my cheek.

We move out of the house. I carry her up to a small stream nearby and let her down. She seems to go mad seeing the water and jumps up and down in the stream. Then I hold her hand tighter.

It is sunny outside. The fields have become a verdant green. Her eyes dart up and down scanning these sights in wonderment, she exclaims—*Aavishh....* As she sees other such sights the same words escape her lips. It is her way of expressing her amazement. How beautiful it all seems!

We come to an open meadow. The new grass envelops the meadow on which I let her down. She runs on this and falls. Gets up, runs and falls yet again. If I go to catch her, she slips past me. Quite some time passes like this. When she tires of playing, she creeps into my arms and hands raised, pitifully asks—*Dhatta?* I then pick her up and pass my hands through her curly locks. Enjoying the pleasure she sings out—*Mamache Gavala Javuya.*[9] She knows by heart all the verses of the songs. But she sometimes hesitates to recite them. At other times she chatters away without prompting.

Unknowingly my mind jumps to the past. It goes back twenty five years and I see little Suman in front of me. Her mother was the only one who gave her all the love and affection when she was small. From me you could say it was hardly any. I never held her or took her for a walk. Never taught her any songs. Never whispered any endearments into her ears. Never understood her needs or desires, since I was always into my writing or busy with my job, engrossed forever in my own world. I remained immersed in the antics of the imaginary

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5. *Thite*: In Marathi or colloquial Konkani, means 'there'.
6. *Dhatta*: The word in Konkani is 'dharta' meaning 'catch', but in the child's language it becomes 'datta' since it is unable to pronounce 'r'. Here, it means take me in your arms.
7. *Bayoch*: The word in Konkani is 'bharoch' means good, but in the child's language it becomes 'bayoch'. 'Tatajjo Bayoch' means 'Good Grandfather'.
8. *Aavvish*: cry of exclamation mostly used by children to convey surprise or wonder.
9. *'Mamache Gavala Javuya'* or *'Let's Go to Our Mama's Village'*: first line of Konkani folk song taught to small children.

children of my stories. Busy in playing with them. In my literary creations there were so many characters, men, women, children, girls and in bringing them up, in flattering them, in following their day to day lives, all my time was spent.

Whenever I was not writing my mind would be lost in an imaginary world. In this world I was brave, hunting tigers in the forest. I was kind, going to the huts of the poor, and asking about their well-being. I was charitable, helping those in distress. I was wanton, wandering about in luxurious places. And showering love on the beautiful girls there. Otherwise just for fun I would dress up the women in this make-believe world. Drifting thus through all the three worlds of heaven, hell and earth, I would find myself, after a while back in the real world.

During this time attention to little Suman and lavishing love and affection never figured in my scheme of things. This is because my mind would be lost in other pursuits. Some fifty sixty toys of Geetul are strewn around the house. There are cars, dolls, planes, dogs, ovens, grinding stones, cooking vessels. Most of the toys are wooden, some of rubber. There are dolls which shake their heads. There are those that close and open their eyes. There are birds which twitter. There are also snakes, mouse and such other animals.

Geetul's father is not rich; he is middle-class. But he fulfils all the wants of Geetul. In reality, he is actually fulfilling his own wants. In her playing, in her singing he gets happiness. When he leaves the house he takes her image with him. He does not loose sight of this image even when he is involved in his work at the office or when he is in the market. Even when he is involved in complicated work, he keeps looking at her image in his mind's eye. He is encouraged by doing this. The moment he steps into the house he picks her up in his arms. Gives her a chocolate and starts dancing and jumping with her. He puts on the record for—*Mamache Gavala Javuya*. And both get immersed in this. They whisper to each other in their play acting. Assume fancy dress sometimes of the Gods and of people of times gone past.

At these times again I am reminded of Suman. She used to play with cloth dolls. She never picked up the courage to come to me for anything. And even if she did I would ask her not to disturb me while I was busy with my writing. Even if I had lifted her in my arms it was to keep my wife happy. The mechanical manner of the interaction bored me. My mind would wander away to my other world! And I would give all the dolls and toys to the children of my stories!

Suman's mother would resent all this to herself. She was too dignified

to express her resentment openly. What if I got angry? Both my wife and child were afraid of my anger.

I also add to Geetul's toy collection. Whenever I see a new toy in the shop, it comes home in a flash. Eyes widened and mouth open in surprise, she exclaims—*Tatajjo...!* In these words are included her gratitude. I pat her lightly on the back, lift her on my shoulders, and like a musician sing out—*Pe Dhoom.*[10] She also does—*Pe Dhoom*—and then dissolves into giggles and becomes consumed in her laughter.

After that she wants to play—*Ghodo* and gets down on her knees. Sometimes she asks me to become the *Ghodo*[11] and then I have to get down on my knees. She climbs on my back as the rider, springs up and down talking to herself as a rider would. She squeals with joy. Sometimes I put oil on her body. I massage her hands and feet, with my palms I rhythmically tap the oil onto her head. She exults in this experience and starts singing. Then Suman takes her to the bathroom and makes Geetul sit on her extended legs. I start pouring hot water on her head. Suman uses soap to scrub Geetul's body. With the warm water touching her body Geetul is happy. She plays with the flow of water falling on her body and laughs all the while, going into raptures, speaking to herself in her own baby language and starts humming one of her favourite songs. Suman towels her off and brings her out and starts putting powder on her body, when Geetul takes some of that powder on her dainty palms and puts it on herself. On her face, on her hair, wherever. With a thin green ribbon she would then try to tie her hair herself without letting her mother do it.

In a little while, dressed up like this she comes out and seeing me breaks out into a smile. There is a mischievous edge to her smile. She comes near to me where I am writing and calls out—*Tatajjo!* She touches my hand, and says—*Basta!*[12] I take her onto my lap. Her hands become restless seeing the various pens, pencils and papers on my table. She looks up at me and tells—I will not touch? I have warned her not to touch the things on my table. She remembers this. After some time when I am a bit inattentive, she says again—I will not touch? and suddenly attacks the table. I try to block her. She avoids me strewing things around on the table. With a lot of difficulty I am able to carry her away and leave her in between her toys.

Geetul picks up a new doll. She sits down spreading her legs. Puts the doll across her legs and starts feeding her with a bottle. Singing—

10. *Pe Dhoom*: sound of drum signifying start of music.
11. *Ghodo*: Konkani for 'horse'.
12. *Basta*: Konkani for 'sit' or 'want to sit'.

Dhol Baye Dhol Ge or *Kavlkekakayno Saad Ye Ghalat, Aaj Aamgaye Bab Jala.*[13]

I get only a little time to write. She takes up most of my time. I happily listen to her ceaseless chatter. If she does not come and prod me, my time does not pass well. I get up and go to my room. Whenever she is around me, she opens out a beautiful garden for me. I then imagine myself driving through this beautiful garden with her running behind me, clapping her little palms in joy.

Then I am reminded of Suman. She would be nestling in the lap of her mother wearing a dotted frock. Her appearance would be dull and sad. In her lap there was no beautiful doll, no nice dress for it to wear, no one also to lavish love and affection on her.

Suman's daughter today has eight ten dresses for everyday wear. She has the same amount of innerwear. If the dresses get dirty then she needs to change. This has become a habit. If her hands get dirty she comes to wash them. If she gets a common cold and cough her father calls a doctor. If she gets a bigger complaint, her father becomes afraid, trembles, he does not cry nor does he get angry, but goes around with a jaded look. He puts on a sweater on her to ward off the cold, gives her some medicine, puts a monkey-cap on her head. All this he does with his own hands.

My thoughts turn to the little Suman when she was bedridden suffering from cold and fever and bothered with a racking cough. Her mother was afraid then. When she told me to call a doctor. I would say, 'For a petty *ailment*, why call the doctor? Give her some *kasai.*[14] Some days pass. Still, the cough did not leave her. Suman became wan and withdrawn because of the ailment. The cough did not even allow her to sleep for a while. She suffered all this in silence. Whenever she felt a bit better she played with some of her toy cooking utensils or made the cloth doll play out something for her. Her mother would be in the kitchen cooking. I would be wandering around outside doing good for the world at large. She made up stories about school when her elder brother was away at school. Suman does not have her own world to retreat to. Like the world of dolls, toys, play vessels, dresses that her daughter, Geetul is always immersed in. Whenever Geetul goes around, her whole world travels with her. Today in Suman's world her biggest asset is Geetul. If Geetul gets a fever, her mother cannot concentrate

13. *'Dhol Baya Dhol Ge'* & *'Kavlekakayno Saad Ye Ghalat, Aaj Aamgaye Bab Jala'*: First line of Konkani folk songs taught to small children.
14. *Kasai*: home-brew concoction made out of various herbs, jaggery & water to cure common ailments like common cold, cough, stomach ache etc.

on her work in the kitchen. Her father does not go to the office. I am the person who gets more worried than her parents and just sit next to her. Geetul has three persons to care for her. Just a plain cold and fever, and what a turmoil there is in the whole house! The other day I got a silk *ghagra-choli*[15] stitched for her. What elegance she showed after putting on the *ghagra-choli!* How great was her wonder! Wearing the *ghagra-choli* her father even took her to town and took a photograph of her! Like this, there are so many photos of her! In her first birthday's photos she looks just like the infant Krishna. A garland of flowers around her neck, bangles of flowers on her wrists, a crown of flowers on her head, how beautiful and godlike she looked!

My Suman was also so beautiful, but I never took special care to remember her birthday. Then, who would take the responsibility of celebrating her birthday? We have no photos in our collection of Suman when she was small. It never occurred to me to have her photos taken. I was always busy in the company of big people, and eager to get my photos taken with famous literary names. I was giddy with my own ideas and work and in all this, where was the time for me to understand little Suman's mind!

Geetul has been given a slate and pencils. She has also got a ruler. A picture-book. She draws lines on the slate with her pencils. In her scribbles, you can see the emerging pattern of a picture. I take the slate and show it to her father. He writes out—*Shri G*[16]—for her, she reads it as—*Shi G*—and wipes out the—*Shri G*—on the slate. She can count up to sixteen. When her mother calls out one, she says two, but somewhere between four and five she stumbles, and jumps to nine going up to ten then eleven. Somehow this exercise reaches sixteen. Seeing all this we are all very happy. She sometimes picks up a big book and opening a page at random will put her finger on it and read—*Shi G*. Opening the picture book she sees the animals in their varied colours. She can recognize tiger, dog, cow and calls out their names. She also says—*Shubh Kaloti Kalyanam*.[17] Mind you: Suman is still just about two years old.

In all three rooms Geetul's playthings and toys are spread around. She strews things around, sometimes spoils them and even goes into

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15. *Ghagra-choli*: small girl's dress consisting of a blouse and a long skirt.
16. *Shri G*: God's name, short for Shri Govinda or Ganesha. Traditionally children would start tracing out Shri G, or God's name written out by an elder on a slate when they start learning to write.
17. *Shubh Kaloti Kalyanam*: Actually *Shubh Karoti Kalyanam* – modified in the child language to Kaloti, is the first line of a prayer invoking God's blessings in Konkani.

the kitchen, brings out the utensils and starts throwing them about. She has the habit of taking the things she likes and throwing them out in the front garden. Then she would look at all the things lying here and there and snicker to herself. In a while when her mood changes, she herself would pick up all her playthings and put them back in their box.

Again my mind slips back into the past. If I found any children's playthings or books on my writing table, I would get very upset. My wife would get the brunt of my temper. I would scold the children. Seeing me thus Suman would go white in fear. She would take shelter behind her mother. I would still look at her searchingly.

Suman became six and started going to school. But I do not remember having asked her ever, "What are you studying, my child?" I never applied myself very much to what she was doing. My interest was elsewhere. All my time was spent in teaching and making perfect the students in the school where I taught Portuguese. I would take my students out on field trips. Organise their games and urge them on in their passions. And my Suman would somehow learn in the village school with books that she would have got somehow. Nobody brought her books of pictures or stories, nor told her stories, nor took her out for a walk.

Geetul comes out wearing a frock, with boots on her feet, a school-bag in her hands, posing as if she were going to school. I enquire with her in fun—'School?School?' and give her a big hug and a kiss.

Little Suman would go to school in the rain. How she studied was nobody's business? If she got good marks at school there was none to congratulate her. Her younger brother, Rajesh was five years old. She would take him to school with her. She would take care of him. If he had any difficulties or problems she would come back and tell her mother. If Rajesh fell on the way and bled from cuts and scratches, Suman was the one who cried. If he got bruised, she was the one who limped. Suman would do a lot of work both inside and outside the house. In her childhood only she became older, more mature, more sombre. Suman would take care of and worried for her older brother also. She assumed this responsibility automatically. Cautioned him when he went out to play. Kept an eye on him when he was playing. If he fell, she helped him up and brought him back home.

Off and on Suman's mother fell sick. She would feel her head is spinning, and her heart is palpitating. At these times she would confine herself to bed. Whenever this happened Suman had to do the cooking also. She never complained. She looked after her mother and also finished all the housework. Suman's Marathi medium schooling got over. At this

time I got involved in the Struggle for Liberation. Consequently sometimes there would be no male person in the house. This created major dilemmas for those at home. One day while involved in a Satyagraha at Panaji I was sent to jail. Everything from the children's education to providing for the household was in a mess. Suman understood these problems. She assumed the responsibility for her brothers, talking to them as if she was their mother.

After about a year I came home, released from jail. Suman looked wan and tired from the work and the worry. I kept myself involved in the Liberation Struggle, without looking at the needs of my children or the well-being of my family. Sometimes the police came looking for me at home. Suman got a shock whenever this happened. Her mother's palpitation increased. Suman's studies were discontinued. All the work of the house rested now on her frail shoulders. In the house, she was the one who was worried about providing for everybody. In those trying times she pushed through the days thinking that those times would soon end and kept thinking about my well-being. My wanderings for the Liberation Struggle took me one day to one village, the next day to another. Sometimes hungry, sometimes with a little food in my stomach! My activities were a bother for Suman since I would be sometimes in the police chowki, sometimes in the forest avoiding them or sometimes inviting them to arrest me by participating in a Satyagraha at some village or other.

My boys began studying in the English medium schools. The impact of my involvement in the Liberation Struggle, and related adventures directly affected only Suman. She was the one who had to face the outside world, on a day-to-day basis take care of all the housework, worry whether I am safe. These were the thoughts that kept her busy the whole day. There was no diversion to her mind other than these obsessive thoughts. Like other girls she did not get to see a play or go to the cinema, or go for an outing, or read books. I was intoxicated with the idea to do something big in the Liberation Struggle, I argued with my colleagues. As I kept arguing and justifying my ideas, my mind grew bolder.

In the hustle and bustle of my mind, there was no place for the well-being and happiness of my family. Suman was the one who had to worry about how today would pass and tomorrow come. I would be in the company of Dr Lohia and others involved in the Liberation Struggle of Goa, sometimes in Belgaum and at other times on the borders. I would be mostly occupied speaking at secret meetings of the freedom fighters in the middle of the night in some village or other at mostly dilapidated temples or be in a hurry to avoid the secret police and reach

the safety of the borders. In all this confusion, Suman was withering away both physically and mentally.

In my old age now a bud is flowering in my mind. The past is shining in a new light; my mind is becoming emotional triggered by gentle empathies. Just like once the cataract in your eye dissolves and you start seeing the distant mountains clearly, the trials and tribulations that my own flesh and blood had undergone becomes clear to me now.

Now Geetul is on my lap. She is not letting me write. She is snatching my pen and paper. I put aside my writing and look into her laughter-filled eyes. As I keep looking those eyes seem to me to be those of Suman. Slowly I start seeing my daughter's shape emerging from the face of my grand-daughter. Then something or other pricks me. I hold Geetul to my heart tightly. And I kiss her.

Today Suman is showing the urge to do a lot of work. She is engrossed in her cooking. My eyes fall on some ten-twelve soiled clothes lying in the corner. I get up and make a bundle of these clothes, clasp them to my chest and rush off to the nearby stream, with the same hope and enthusiasm as I had shown during the Liberation Struggle.

Translated from Konkani by S Kamat

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Till Sleep Overpowers

Narendra Kohli

He roamed here and there feeling disturbed. He had glanced at his wristwatch so many times. He had even looked at the timepiece on the table, but his restlessness did not leave him. He had gone up to the door many times and come back. Many times he had given up the idea of going out and came back to sit on the sofa or lie down on the divan. Nothing made him feel at rest.

Ultimately he changed his clothes. He put his trousers and shirt on and got ready to go out. He put his shoes on as well. As he wiped them with a piece of cloth, he thought that now he would have to get out of the house, he couldn't wait any longer.

Suddenly he remembered that his wallet did not have much money, there were only four or five rupees in it. That wouldn't be adequate, he might have to go far. At this hour it would be difficult to get transport, he might have to take a cab. A bus was certainly not the best mode of transport one could use to look for a person.

He opened the cupboard and took out five ten rupee notes. It was possible for him to spend on things other than conveyance. Why did the casualty room of a big hospital loom large before him? A number of times he had imagined himself standing in front of pharmacies that remained open throughout the night.

He shook his head trying to get rid of his thoughts. He picked up the lock put it on the outer door and came out of his room. As he bolted his door, he paused before locking it.

Where would he go at this hour? He kept staring at every woman on the road, not able to recognize any of them. Maybe there was something wrong with his eyes. It was possible that his glasses needed changing... Or did this happen with everyone...he could not recognize anyone from

far and as they came close, all of them seemed to be the person he was looking for.

The last time he had got so worked up and set out to look for Shiela, she had come home the minute he had gone out of the house. By the time he had spent fifteen rupees on a taxi and come home after his futile mission, she was waiting for him on the verandah, looking bored.

The two of them had fought tooth and nail after that. He was angry with Shiela for coming home late, it worried him very much. She, on the other hand, was fed up with his restlessness. After all she did not go out for pleasure, it was work and she got late because of it. Coming home dead tired and finding the house locked was enough to make anyone boil with anger!

He felt that he should wait for some more time. Maybe Shiela would come in a little while. It was a big city with a third rate transport system. No big deal if it got late. After all why did he have to think that Shiela was in danger, waiting to be rescued by him...No, he should wait for some more time....

As he stood waiting, he saw a shadowy figure coming into this square, moving rather slowly, in a tired manner. It looked like a woman, maybe it was Shiela. As the figure approached, he was quite convinced that it was Shiela, and it really was.

He felt lighter as if a load was off his chest. Shiela was back albeit late. What difference did it make—a working person could get delayed. He felt a sense of relief as if on a different plane. He would not have to go out in the dark, confront uncertainties and fears on the road. He was saved from all that.

But a slight irritation persisted...why did Shiela not realize that he was concerned about her and...

Shiela looked at him in a strange manner and went into the room crossing the verandah, without even a word to him. She had not stopped to talk about her troubles, nor did she justify her delay or admitted that she had been in the wrong. She came and stood close to him quietly as if expecting him to start scolding...

His glance fell on the room and he looked at her uncertainly. Neither did she say anything, nor did she appear to be in a mood to listen to him. She did not fling herself on the sofa as if nothing had happened. Maybe she could not make up her mind how she would broach the matter to him...

His sharp voice had an edge of irritation, "You..."

"Yes, I am back." Shiela's voice seemed to come from some other

plane. She had never spoken from this plane earlier. Then, as if testing his patience, she said, "I am late, am I not?"

His irritation hid itself like a beaten dog, "Yes, it is very late. But you..."

"But you did not go out looking for me?" Shiela seemed to be taunting him.

He felt embarrassed. Perhaps Shiela was making fun of his emotional nature. Then he summoned all his courage. What was wrong in getting worried about one's own wife? That was his nature. She could not make fun of him for this. He said in a normal voice, "Yes, I was thinking of it. See, I had taken out the lock and key of the main door."

"It kept on getting late and you kept on worrying?" There was a depth in Shiela's voice.

He got annoyed and looked at Shiela. She was looking straight at him and he could see the scratches on her face and forehead, bruises that had already started getting blue. He shuddered...Her hair was dishevelled and so were her clothes...Had Shiela been accosted by the wrong kind of persons? Maybe no, maybe yes, he told her every day, to avoid crowds, moving buses...He could only ask, "What happened to you?"

And Shiela's face crumpled. Maybe she was wondering how to confront him till now. Now there was no going back.

"Every day you were apprehensive about accidents. I would reassure you every day. But..."

"It had to happen today. I had been worrying about it..." He came closer to her, "I hope you are not badly hurt. Shall I apply some Dettol or something..."

His voice sounded very soft as if trying to soothe her wounds.

Shiela did not answer. She sat down on the sofa, "No, it is not the kind of hurt that Dettol can clean up....I am very tired."

She lay down on the sofa and closed her eyes.

He felt that they had covered the initial distance between themselves. Now he could ask her about the incident and she could talk about it. He came very close to her, "But what happened?"

Shiela was still lying flat with her eyes closed as she answered, "The same problem about the bus."

The irritation he had been trying to suppress, burst out, "You must have tried to hop on to a running bus, isn't it? How many times have I told you..."

Shiela interrupted him, "No. I did not get on or off a running bus. I remembered what you had told me. Your words were not unheeded."

He was surprised to find that his voice had calmed down and sounded

under control. He tried to calm himself as he asked, "Then what happened? Did you fall down? Did someone jostle you?"

For the first time, he could sense exasperation in her voice, "No, no..."

Suddenly his voice became shrill, "Then, why don't you tell me? You have injured yourself and now you come home and lie down quietly! Why don't you say something? First I kept on waiting for you and worrying, now when I ask you what happened, there is no answer."

Shiela opened her eyes at once and she sat up as if she would retort sharply. But then she changed her mind. The aggression ebbed out of her and she collapsed into the sofa. "I will tell you everything. First get me a glass of water, please."

He went in to get water and Shiela sat up, as if in her senses. She took out her compact from her purse and looked at her face in its mirror, carefully, as if surveying the effects of an incident that had occurred in the past. Then she passed her hand over the scratches and bruises, as if feeling them.

He had brought water for her. Shiela shut the compact, put it back in the purse and shut it. She drank the water, kept the glass on the small table and lay down again. She had closed her eyes again.

He kept on waiting for her to say something. But she lay very quietly with her eyes closed, but he could sense that something was going on very fast in her mind, maybe a recalling of the events...as if an old film was being re-run...he could not wait any longer and said, "You were about to tell me something."

Shiela's upper lip curled as if making fun of him, "Won't you scold me today for coming home so late? Women from respectable families do not keep such late hours."

He felt like crying. Shiela was making fun of his love. But he did not cry. He felt like giving a long speech with a bit of action, at the moment. "You know a person is most apprehensive about someone he is attached to. As you get late, I imagine the worst. I can almost visualize you running in the middle of the road to catch a bus and suddenly another bus, truck or car comes and rams onto you. You lie in the middle of the road bleeding profusely and no one comes to your help. Or you are waiting at the bus stop, waiting...waiting...and there is no sign of a bus. It is ten thirty, eleven, eleven thirty...and you get into trouble."

But he did not say all this. He could only say, " I imagine the worst when you get late."

Shiela asked in a listless manner, "What do you get out of your imaginings."

He looked at Shiela, stunned. Did she really want to know the answer to the question or was she making fun of him? He felt that somewhere at the back of her mind she held him responsible for this incident...and he was responsible. If he had not let Shiela work...but Shiela was working even before they had got married...

He came back to his earlier mood, "I imagine so many things and worry about them, pacing around the room. Sometimes I wait at the door looking out on to the street, but I know that these are just my apprehensions. That is why I don't do anything.

Shiela got up and sat on the sofa. It was as if she had washed off her earlier expression from her face but had not cared to put on any other—it was a face devoid of any expression. In a detached manner as if talking about somebody else, she said, "I came out at ten after my duty. At about a quarter past ten I was at the bus stop. 10.20, 10.25, 10.30, still my bus did not come. This could only mean that the last bus had left before time or had missed its trip. I should have waited for some other bus. But I could not see any other bus coming this side. I kept on waiting, not being able to muster up enough courage to take a scooter or taxi." Shiela stopped for a while, looking at him to see how he took all this and then said, "At 10.45 a bus came. I waved at it to stop. The bus stopped. It did not have any board to mark its destination. I did not know where it was going.

"Maybe it was heading towards the depot." He lit a cigarette and sat listening.

Shiela gave him time to inhale and then said, "Yes. The conductor said that the bus was going to the depot. I said, it does not matter, drop me at Ring Road."

"Was there no one else in the bus?" There was a note of apprehension in his voice.

"No, there were two other persons." Shiela said.

"Still, you showed a lot of courage." He was reassured. He took another puff at his cigarette.

"Yes." She said. "But both of them got off at the next stop. As the bus started, the conductor went over to the driver and whispered something. I suspected that they were up to something. I realized that I should not have got on to this empty bus."

He had stopped leaning and his back was tense, "Were they up to any mischief?"

There was an irritated look on Shiela's face, "Can't you make out from my face..."

He burst out, "I know how people get fresh with a woman travelling alone. What can one say about the moral degeneration in our country.

You can't trust a fellow," he controlled himself and lowered his voice, "What happened then?"

"The driver turned off all the lights in the bus." She said.

"You did not stop him!" His voice sounded agitated.

"No." Shiela went back to her expressionless voice. "I was very scared and could not speak. And then I did not want to provoke them in any way. I prayed to God that if I reached home safely today, I would offer *prasad* at the Hanuman Mandir at Connaught Place."

He had an expression of contempt. "This means that one has to go to the Hanuman Mandir at Connaught Place and offer *prasad* tomorrow."

Shiela's face darkened with anger, "So, you think that I have reached home safe and sound."

He felt ashamed. Shiela's anger was justified. He laughed in an embarrassed manner.

Shiela went back to her story. Suddenly she seemed detached from all that had happened. There seemed to be no remorse in her, no anger. She had become detached—as if all this had happened to someone else, not her. As if her only link with it was that of a narrator. She was eager to narrate the incident in all its detail. As she would narrate it, it would get out of her system, out into the world...

"As the driver switched off the lights, the conductor started humming *pyar kiya to darna kya* and came and sat next to me. I was very angry at his insolence and that gave me courage. I said in an angry voice, "The whole bus is empty. Why don't you sit somewhere else."

He felt a nerve tingling somewhere. In a choked voice he asked, "Did he get up and go?"

Shiela's voice was still cold. "No. He did not pay any attention to my words. On the other hand, he crept closer to me, nestled up to me and said, 'My darling, why are you so angry?' "

He got up in his agitation, threw away his cigarette with a jerk and crushed it under foot. "I see. Did you note down the number of the bus?"

Shiela was untouched by his agitation. In a voice that seemed to talk to him as to a child, she said. "Yes, I have the number. But listen...there is more to come. I knew something dire was going to happen. I pushed the conductor hard. He lost his balance and fell down from the seat. I shouted loudly 'driver, stop the bus...' "

He looked at her numbly and she went on as if narrating a story, "He did not stop the bus. On the other hand, he increased the speed."

"The roads were deserted. Not a soul could be seen. I was alone in the bus. The lights had been switched off and the bus was speeding along."

"How did you get out of it?" He swallowed as if something was sticking in his throat.

"Then the conductor got up and lunged at me. I had taken off my sandal. Incidentally, today I had worn my sandals with steel heels. I hit him hard with it. There were bruises on his face. His head had started bleeding."

"That was well done!" His smile was forced. "I would have hit him harder."

Shiela looked at him as an adult looks at a bragging child. "Yes, I had thought the same but he did not give me the chance to call you from home. I hit him as hard as I could."

He then lit a cigarette and said, "Well done, well done."

"I went on hitting him but he did not let go of me. He put his hand in my blouse and tugged it. All the buttons came off..."

"What!" His hair stood on an end. "Give me the number of the bus. I will do something at once... Horrible! How can one live in this country? No woman is safe here."

Shiela did not think of him. She went on as if she had to get it out of her system. She would stop only after she had finished. "By then the driver had parked the bus in an isolated spot. Then he came up to me as well. They gagged me with a piece of cloth and tied up my hands..."

He could hardly speak, he was so agitated. There were tears in his eyes; Shiela was still sitting calmly as if all this had not happened to her she was narrating someone else's experience.

"How did you escape them?" He asked in a voice that was choked.

"How could I?" Shiela laughed in a strange manner. "I did not." And then she started crying, The first time it seemed to dawn on her that all this had happened to her and hurt her very deeply, "The two of them took turns..." She covered her face with her hands. She was sobbing.

He was absolutely numbed for a while. It took him some time to come back to some kind of normalcy. He was full of resentment and a kind of fear. After a while he realized that this incident had frightened him, and he was angry with her for putting him in such a situation.

"Why didn't you stop them? Why didn't you put up a resistance?" He said almost with a scream.

Shiela suddenly stopped crying. There was not pain in her eyes now. She felt that she had been apprehensive that such a thing might happen. Though she had not admitted it to herself, she had known that consciously her husband might...maybe she would have to fight her husband to prove

her integrity... There was an edge to her voice, "Does it seem to you from whatever I have said, that I did not put up a resistance?"

His anger did not abate even as Shiela said this, "The conductor was all alone till the driver joined him. Why didn't you jump out of the bus?"

Shiela looked at him, eyes wide open in surprise. "You mean, I should have jumped out of the bus going at full speed. You are the one who told me never to get on to or off a running bus...maybe you cannot even imagine how fast the bus was running. If I had jumped out I would have surely died. No power in the world could have saved me."

He stared at Shiela, "Wouldn't it have been better for you to die? How can you tell me that two men had...If you had not died earlier, you should have died afterwards."

Shiela felt that a part of her consciousness was ready to fight against such allegations. She got very angry and said, "Stop talking nonsense. Who are you to tell me all this? If two men attack you tomorrow, break your bones, gouge out one eye or cut off your nose, I will say all that you have just said to me...Shows how chivalrous you are...how much you care for your wife. Go and get me the heads of those men."

He shuddered. What was Shiela saying? How could he cut off someone's head? He was scared at the sight of blood. That is why he had stopped eating meat. He felt like vomiting.

"How can I do that? These are not the days of the Raj..." he stopped himself. True, these were not the days of chivalry when he could chop off someone's head. Why then did he ask Shiela to kill herself? "I can report the matter to the police. Give me the number of the bus."

Shiela seemed to taunt him, "What will you report...two men had..."

He snapped at her, "How can I say that?"

Shiela's voice had a depth to it now, "Then what else will you say? Only this that two men teased my wife. You cannot even bring yourself to say it and are asking me to kill myself!"

"Who wants to kill you?" He went on in a mechanical way, "But this kind of existence full of humiliation..."

"What is so humiliating about it?' Shiela said. "If I had voluntarily let all this take place, you could have called me immoral, but the circumstances in which all this happened was beyond my control and you cannot malign my character. So why should I die when I have done nothing wrong? I refuse to. I am going to live it down. Let us not talk about it to anyone."

He did not realize when he had started behaving in such a manner.

Tears were streaming down his cheeks. "Oh, I feel so ashamed ! I am not fit to show my face to anyone. How can I face anyone now!"

Shiela stared at him and said in a reprimanding voice, "Why, what's wrong with you? You have not been raped. I am the one who has gone through it all. What has your face to do with it?"

He was annoyed at being scolded like this. He gnashed his teeth angrily and said, "Shut up. Any other woman in your place would have banged her head against the wall and killed herself! All you can do is joke about it."

"See, I am not happy with whatever happened to me." She said in a cold voice. "But I was not at fault at all. So I don't feel any remorse and certainly don't want to die just for this. I refuse to die...The rest is up to you. If you feel like it, you can track down those persons and kill them, or lodge a report with the police. If you can't do any of this, you can separate your self from me..."

"I don't need your directions." He felt down and out. Shiela always did this to him. She never admitted her faults, on top of that she bossed over him. "You think we can remain together even after this! You expect me to live with you! Everyone will point a finger at me and say—this is he man whose wife was raped by a conductor and a driver. Our relationship snapped the moment you told me all about it. There is nothing between us. You cannot remain in my house anymore!"

Shiela looked at him, he was really very angry. Maybe he was so angry that he could push her out of the house. Maybe he had nothing against those two men. Shiela was the target of all his anger. She felt like laughing but she restrained herself and said in a calm voice, "All right there is nothing between you and me. I will not remain in your house. The only concession I can offer you is that if you cannot take your belongings right now, you can collect them tomorrow morning. I wonder if you remember that the flat has been allotted to me and not to you."

He started. He had never realized that the conversation would take such a turn. He had never bothered about it. It would have been better if he had. The flat had been allotted to Shiela, naturally she would remain there. The best he could do was to collect all his belongings and go away. But go where? On the road? On the railway platform? He was not foolhardy to believe that he would manage to get two small rooms on rent even if he paid his entire salary. Since he did not have a government job like her, he could not think of a government flat...where could he go? To some hotel? To a friend's house? But till when?

He did not say anything. He paced the room breathing hard, from one end of the room to the other. In a short while, his breathing became normal and his pace slowed down. Could he just laugh and say to her, "Let's stop all this nonsense and go to bed."

But something within him did not let him laugh. He went and stood in front of Shiela, "I will take my things and go away tomorrow." His nostrils flared a bit, "Listen to me for once and all, you cannot get away with this sort of blackmail. This way you will blackmail me if I don't report at the maintenance office that the flush is not working or even if I don't kill the mouse hiding in the larder. You will continue to blackmail me even if you go around with another man."

Shiela felt a split within her. One part of her wanted to make up with her husband. She knew that her husband was experiencing a similar conflict...and one half of him was fighting in a superficial manner...so that the other person would make up...

Suddenly she started crying, "I am so unhappy. Even if we compromise today, what about the future. Tomorrow we might have children. When they get to know what their mother had to go through, won't they commit suicide! Oh God, look at the things my husband and children have to go through just because of me..."

He felt himself relenting. This was the first time Shiela had taken it all on herself. She was behaving in a humble manner for the first time. He noticed that she was looking down, weeping continuously.

He came up to her and started consoling, "Go to bed now. It is quite late. You have shown yourself to be a great Indian woman. People will be inspired by you...how you fought those two bestial men single handed, unarmed. Anyway go to bed. You must be tired after the day's work. Tomorrow is a working day as well."

Shiela looked up, wiped her eyes and said, "All right, I will go to bed. But promise me you will not go away with your things tomorrow morning."

"We will talk about it later. Go to bed now." He said. "If you look at yourself in the mirror you will see, how worn out you look."

Shiela tried to smile faintly and said in a coaxing manner, "No. First promise me that you will not go away tomorrow morning. Otherwise I'll not be able to sleep a wink worrying about how I will have to manage all by myself in this flat."

"Yes. You get scared very easily!" He agreed to what Shiela had said. "All right, I shan't go. You will be miserable all by yourself. How will you fight the case all by yourself?"

Shiela looked at him sideways. He was still talking about the case.

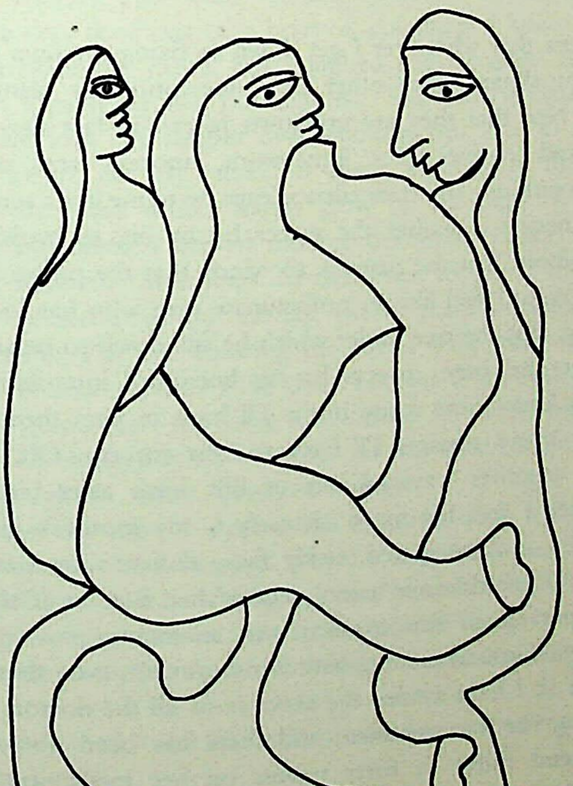
Maybe his ego had still not got reconciled to the situation.

"Shall we go to bed then?" she asked.

"Yes, let's go. I am also feeling sleepy." He said and went and lay down on his side of the bed.

Translated from Hindi by Purabi Panwar

❑



Reflections in Broken Mirror

Salaam Bin Razzaq

It so happens that whenever I get down to fixing my own photographs in my photoalbum some other faces surreptitiously plant themselves on my face. Not that they are unknown faces—in fact they are actually my friends' and relatives faces. Time worn, innocent faces, with soft and well-defined contours. But their silence leaps up to me like a scream,horribly jangling my nerves. I gather the pieces bit by bit, to evolve them into a complete whole. But the place is so windy that the pieces scatter away, eluding my grasp. I feel like an unfortunate man who has lost his breath while running. But the tree under which he sits down to regain his breath is shadowless and bare, insects having burrowed into its roots.

I don't know how many births I'll have to pass through to reach myself. How many screams I'll have to hear enroute. Oh, how painful it is to put together waywird bits of life, birth after birth.

The face I feel for more intensely is my mother's face, covering my own face—a disintegrated, sickly face, almost a total wreck. I can discern signs of tiredness in every vein of her face, as if she is getting ready to depart from this moment any moment.

Even so, I am continuing with her treatment, even though I realise the futility of it. I have availed the services of all the doctors and hakims of the locality for her treatment and there has been no let up in my efforts. I spend thirty to forty rupees on her medicines, apart from substantial amounts on fruit and wholesome diet for her. Oh, no, I'm not bragging or taking some undue credit for it. It is my duty towards her. Every day I do three hours overtime, tell a score of lies, hunt for a fact cock from whom I can filch money. I have to do all this perforce, out of sheer necessity as it were, you know. These days how can one maintain a family on three hundred rupees a month? Of course, mother is fully aware of it. Last month when I had an unexpected windfall

of three hundred rupees to boot, I bought wearing apparel for all, sweets and toys for the children. Everybody felt so happy. The next day mother visited Karam Ali's shrine and made a votive offering at it. Maybe, for all I know, she might have also prayed for my prosperity. A mother is prepared to do anything for her children in all earnestness, even if it is a bad cause.

Once mother told an ideal story, befitting our hallowed tradition. It was about a son who while departing on his journey found that his mother had sewn in his sleeve under the armpit a hundred dinars and given him the parting advice that he should never speak a lie come what may. It was because of this truth that brigands who had waylaid him on the way had relented.

If my mother had acted on this advice, I am sure, she would have died the very third day of a bout of coughing. I knew her constant coughing forebode her death. She coughed and coughed and this is all that she was capable of and nothing else. She had become so irritable that she would lose her temper over nothing. But it is in man's nature to cling to life till his last breath. Is there anybody in the world who descends in the grave with a happy glow on his face? While she was lying a lingering death I served mother devoutly. Hadn't she nurtured me with her milk for three years. In deference to that I have also been keeping her on medicines for the last twelve years without a frown on my face. Oh, no, I'm not equating medicines with milk. No, not by a long shot. But how explain? One does not get a decorative medal for nothing. One gets it only for some meritorious act of devotion and such like traits. To be credited as a good man one has to kill umpteenth desires and pass through so many slaughter houses.

The other day when I went to the chemist's shop to buy medicines for mother, by mistake I stepped into the adjoining wine shop. I kept looking temptingly at the tantalising coloured wine bottles. When I handed the medical prescription to the man at the counter she gave me a sneering look. "The next shop. Go to the next shop," he said raising an accusing finger.

It was only then that I realised my mistake retraced my steps feeling completely put out.

That night I could not sleep well and kept getting bizarre and outlandish dreams. I found myself wandering in a desolate desert my throat parched with thirst. I was running around like an animal, my tongue hanging out from my mouth. Then I saw a fountain ahead of me and I darted towards it. But before I could reach the fountain I found myself sinking into the sand up to my knees. And I kept sinking into it, down and down.

That night it dawned upon me for the first time what a disturbing element mother's cough was for my sleep, how egregiously it could rake up my sleep! All the same I have continued with her treatment. I am not an undutiful son. I have decided, even if I have to sell all my assets, including myself, I will keep on treating her, till her last breath. Everybody loves one's mother and so do I. Love is perhaps man's last resort.

There is another face imprinted alongside mother's face. Sad, exhausted, dented. It is my late father's face. Now he does not exist in this world. Illness? No, he had no illness. He drank himself to death. In his last days he had started drinking so heavily that even his sweat smelled of alcohol. But I consider my father a great man, because like all great men he was unhappy with his wife. I mean, my mother. Perhaps it was to drown his unhappiness that he took to drinking. I remember in the course of a squabble with Mother he had said, "I get more peace in Usha's kotha than in your house." Mother was furious. She kept abusing and cursing father the whole day. Even the hearth was not lit that day. Father took me to a hotel to eat.

When father was on deathbed they tried to pour some drops of holy water in his mouth. But he refused. "Pour some drops of liquor in my mouth instead," he said. I wanted to give him two spoonfuls of whisky but the elders present there rebuked me and pushed me aside.

On the third day of his death to bring peace to father's soul, five faquirs were ceremoniously served a rich repast, father's favourite dishes being the main items of the menu. The food was served in brand new hitherto un-used utensils and additionally the faquirs were given six yards of cloth each to make kurta-pajamas from so that father would have full benefit of this pious act in the upper world.

I watched the goings-on in silence while the faquirs recited the *kalma*, while patting their bulging stomachs. When they came out, six yard long pieces of cloth tucked under their arms I waylaid them and holding a ten-rupee note before each of them said in a meek voice, "Shahsaheb, my father was very fond of good food and along with it of good wine. Here, take this small amount and down one peg. This was my father's last wish."

This had greatly angered the faquirs and they had fulminated against my unbecoming behaviour. In his lifetime father had earned a huge lot of money and threw it away most recklessly as if he had earned it on horse racing and the satta market, for me he had left me the legacy of a tumble-down, permanent illnesses and a debt of twelve thousand rupees. My creditors pestered me, cajoled me, threatened me and in the end gave up, thinking that they had lost the game and nothing would

come of it. But the tumble-down house and a wrecked mother are still very much with me.

Looking at it closely, we do not spend more than ten percent of our lives exclusively on ourselves. The rest ninety percent of our life is spent in fulfilling, others wishes as if we are indebted to them in a way or the other.

According to my mother as she often professed to me, it was her last desire to marry me off in her lifetime. Like a dutiful son, I bided by her wishes and got married. It is now almost eight years that I entered holy wedlock. But my wife still continues to make one demand after another demand on me. The source of her demands seems to be perennial; perhaps it may never end.

Here, have a look at my wife's picture. It was taken at the time when she came to our house as a bride. She looks harmless and docile like a cow. Doesn't she? You are right. But you have failed to look at her sharp horns. My good man, only one who wears the shoes knows where it pinches or where the nail hurts....Now she has become very fat and flabby—layer upon layer of fat. She hardly knows anything of the world outside the confines of her domestic life. How nice of a woman to remain domesticated. It is so comforting. Remain tied to the daily routine with straightjacketed rigidity. Get up in the morning, blunder into making something which passes for food, find some cause to blame it on mother-in-law, be fussy with the children and as the night comes entrust her perspiring body to me, her hubby, and then turn on her side and fall into deep slumber. Lo and behold, one more staid, stale and eventless day of life comes to a close.

In the beginning I did feel perturbed at her womanish innanities and crass ignorance. But then I got accustomed to it. Now take the same pleasure in cowing her down as a rider takes in reining in a restive horse. Like every woman she also has a weakness for jewellery and fine attire. It is I who has to atone for it. The forty gram mangalsutra that you see round her neck, oh, what intense humiliation I had to undergo to obtain it for her. I wagged my tail like dog before the boss to shake the pagoda tree. I manouvered for the chair which yielded clandestine money. For this, I had to buy Gupta's enmity who was the main contender for this post which I got out of turn. I even jumped for a measly amount of a rupee or two which was like cutting my own throat. Don't think that my wife's greed got blunted after getting the mangalsutra. Not at all. Greed always gets intensified with age. But one good thing, my wife is very faithful to me. It should not be difficult to think why. A woman who has become flabby and ungainly and has lost the art of

enticing other males, what else can she do if not remain faithful to her hubby?

As I have told you love and fidelity are a man's last resort.

My wife is madly in love with two things—jewellry and Billu.

Billu is our seven-year old son. People think he is very beautiful. No, he has not taken after me. His complexion is fair and he has blue eyes. I am not handsome by any means. Far from it. My wife thinks that when Billu grows up he will resemble Richard Burton. Oh, no, my wife has nothing to do with Richard Burton. Look at him and look at her. I had only taken her to see Backett when Billu was in her womb. She adored Richard Burton. I also remember that during that night she clung to me and kept kissing me passionately.

Billu is now seven years old. But even now she makes him sit in her lap and put food in her mouth. She asks him to sleep by her side. Sometimes she kisses him and hugs him so intensely that I begin to feel jealous of him. After Beckett I did not take her to see any other Richard Burton film. She often tell me that one day Billu will emerge as a great actor. I just keep mum. In my childhood my mother also used to see the dream of my becoming a doctor. What else can a man do except see dreams? It comes so easily to him.

Like other wives, nay wife also hates her in-laws family. Particularly, my uncle and his progeny. After father's death, these persons who are standing around me in the picture, I mean, uncle and his three sons entered into litigation against me for father's delapidated house. Once he had even roughed me up by goondas. But relationships never get sundered. Relationship is a burden of life which man carries on his back all his life. He may take of the burden at some turning of life to pause for rest. But he has again to load the burden on his back and march on till he reaches the mouth of his grave.

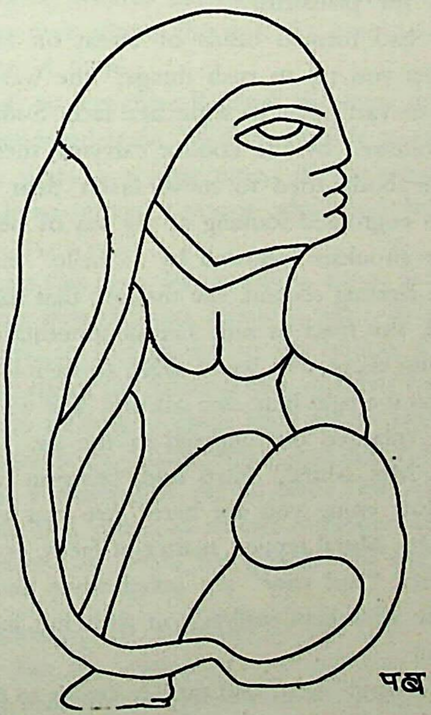
Next to my family members, my wife dislikes my friends. But on the contrary, I like my friends immensely. A man can live without a wife and family members. But even for a moment can you conceive living without friends? At least not I.

These people who are standing around me in the picture are very good friends of mine. But I know some of them have tagged them on to me because they want to get something out of me. Same is the case with me. I also keep clinging to some friends with some dormant or ulterior purpose in mind. If you look at it closely, every friendship is based on some personal motive. Perhaps even friendship by itself is one of the innumerable necessities of life—mother, father, wife, brother, relatives, friends—so many shadows are hovering around me. I have

become mirror in which so many reflections inter-mix and get blurred. In this crowd of shadows I go in quest of finding my own being and identity. This quest is so futile and tiring that I feel completely drained out. I am a devoted son, a faithful husband, a loving father, a brother, a friend. What I am, I am in relation to others. But I'm nothing by myself.

Sometimes I feel that my life is like a book of which I am only a title. I ransack the pages of the book but I don't find a word relating to the title.

Translated from Urdu by Jai Ratan



Sailing in the Same Boat

Shaani

Kirti could not sit still. For the umpteenth time she got up from the bench and started pacing. Was it her imagination or did the hoot from the train sound closer? It would be any moment now that the train would reach the platform....

The anxiety had formed beads of sweat on her brow. "This is what happens when you try to rush things," she was telling herself as she reached for her sari pallu to wipe her face. Suddenly there was a rush of people followed by the coolies carrying their luggage causing total chaos as everybody tried to move faster than the others.

Kirti was so engrossed looking at the sea of people, that the feel of a hand on her shoulder followed by a "hello" made her jump out of her skin. For a fleeting second, she thought that maybe it was Rajjan, but as she turned, she tried to hide her disappointment when she saw Mrs. Mittal standing there. She was a sight to behold. Her ample body somehow stuffed in the light blue, raw silk sari. The whiff of the imported perfume she had splashed on, lingered in the air.

"Oh! Hello Mrs. Mittal," Kirti said, bringing her hands together in a greeting, "How come you are here? Are you going somewhere?"

"Bhopal," Mrs. Mittal replied, matter-of-factly, as if going to Bhopal was routine for her, "and you?" she asked while her eyes kept darting towards the coolie who kept walking on with her luggage towards the train compartment

"Rajjan is coming!" Kirti said quickly, trying to hide the expression of utter ridicule on seeing Mrs. Mittal's new look. The thought of Rajjan coming, had been nagging her for a while, but Kirti now focused her attention on Mrs. Mittal, especially when after so many years she stood there in all her finery and talking about going to Bhopal.

"Really?" exclaimed Mrs. Mittal, shifting her weight from one foot to the other, "By this train?"

"Yes"

"Has it not been a few days since Rajjan landed in India? I don't remember who was mentioning this...."

"He had to stop over in Delhi for a few days," Kirti cut her short, before Mrs. Mittal could come up with something unpleasant. At that very moment the train entered the platform with a loud roar. Mrs. Mittal parted with, "O.K then, we shall meet when I get back..." and in the entire hullabaloo caused by the trains' arrival, Kirti did not notice Mrs. Mittal moving on. Her anxiety had reached a crescendo—perspiration, dry throat, and the feeling as though she had swallowed a toad. It brought back memories of the day her results were to be declared and the way she had waited for the newspaper to be delivered. That day too she had reached the station in her impatience.

Should she stay where she was? Or should she just ignore the pushing and shoving and move towards the train? But seeing the sea of people, she decided to just wait where she was. As it is people kept banging into her, as she stood there.

"Will I be able to recognize Rajjan?" the same thought of the past few days crossed her mind again. "Will he be able to recognize me from a distance?" Seven years is a long time...during which a child attains youth, the young have moved towards adulthood and on to the old age...

She had chosen this spot very carefully. From here she could keep an eye on the people disembarking and also have the exit gate in sight.

Nothing seemed to ever change at the station, over the years. Be it any season, day or night, the locomotions of trains and people seemed like an endless stream of action. There were always people—surrounded with luggage and friends or family, either arriving from somewhere or ready to embark of a journey to far of place.The expressions on the faces of people who had come to receive someone or the other, also varied. On some faces one could see elation and excitement, whereas on some others....

"RAJJAN!" Kirti let out a scream as she leapt towards the first class compartment, but the very next moment she looked away, embarrassed. The young man who just got off did look familiar, she convinced herself. Looking around, she found she was sure she spotted Rajjan this time, till he went up to the girl standing next to a vendor. Scanning the crowd once more, she nearly followed a few more people whom she had mistaken to be Rajjan.

As she stood disappointed, watching the last of the passengers go, Kirti wondered if today too she would have to return alone. The thought sent shivers down her spine. Again face that look on papa's face, again hear mother's brooding, which brought tears to her eye's–again that tension...

"What happened?"

Mrs. Mittal had managed to spot Kirti through the crowd and again formed the question with her hands. She was curious to know if Rajjan had arrived.

Kirti stood still without saying a word and simply stared at Mrs. Mittal. Then when she could think of no answer, she simply raised her hand in a goodbye and started waving, as if she had come to see her off only.

Not just Kirti, but the entire household was reeling under the same tension. It had been on a Tuesday, about thirteen days back, when Rajjan was supposed to have landed in Mumbai. The restlessness of everybody was reaching an all time high.

"What's the time, Kirti?" Papa had asked her for the third time.

"Four-o-clock!"

"Only nine hours left," Papa said, staring a spot on the wall, but seeing nothing. "Rajjan's plane will land at six-o-clock."

"So? He can't come and meet you immediately!" Mother said, exasperatedly, after papa had said the same thing for the seventh time in half hour intervals. Mother could not bear his impatience any more. Rajjan was landing in Mumbai, which was about seven hundred miles from his home. Even if he wanted, it was not geographically possible for him to cover that distance immediately. Papa was the first to wake up every morning, but that day he did not let anybody sleep. Mother, Kirti and Shobha—all were woken up early. He even reached the outhouse, walking as fast as he could with the support of his walking stick, to wake up Shyamlal.

The day began with, "Rajjan is coming today!" and was heard from every corner of the house, throughout the day, like a stuck record. When this fact had sunk in, husband and wife sat reminiscing—Rajjan's habits, qualities and abilities were discussed at length. If this was not enough, Kirti could hear movement in her parents' room till very late at night. Sleep eluded them.

When Rajjan had left for England seven years back to pursue a diploma in engineering, nobody had anticipated it would take him this long to come back. He had said that he would be back in two, maybe two and a half years. He had been married for only six months at that

time. It was decided that Ratna would go with him. It would be very lonely in a foreign country and she would be good company. Plus, she would be a moral support and help ease the tension so he could concentrate on his studies.

The two and a half years stretched to three, but Rajjan did not return. He did write once, informing them that he had picked up a temporary job. It would pay for their passage and they might even be able to save part of it....

Then came the news that even Ratna had got a job at a radio station there and together they were earning a good amount.

This created a new situation. Rajjan now seemed insecure about getting a job as good on his return. This was apparent through his letter. Initially his letters suggested his eagerness to come back, but not anymore.

Since Rajjan has left, there had been a series of unfortunate incidents. The brother, younger than Shobha had died. Kirti's older sister had moved to Banaras after her marriage. Papa had retired from his Government job and was sitting at home and worst of all was that over a period of time he had lost his eyesight.

"There could be none as unfortunate as me," Rajjan had written when he got the news, "that so much has happened and I could not be with you. I really am a wretched soul or may be I am getting punished for the misdeeds of my previous life, that I can't be with you at a time like this and I am here thousands of miles away from you...but papa you need not worry—in a day or two I will be consulting an eye specialist here and I am sure that the day I get you here everything will be all right."

As the letter was read to him, papa could not hold back his tears. He took the letter from Kirti and let his fingers roam over it as if trying to feel the words. Choking with tears, he turned to mother and said, "I swear by god! Now I am not bothered about my eyes anymore." And that day, the entire household sat surrounding papa. Kirti, Shobha and Mother sat while papa once again narrated stories and anecdotes of his workplace.

Kirti hesitated as she reached the gate.

This had been happening for the past three to four days. Kirti walked back from the station and managed to cover the distance fairly quickly. But somehow, her steps seemed to falter as she approached her house.

This was not new to her, but she had not felt this helpless before. The other days might have been an illusion, but today the situation seemed different. Even though baseless, but she had a strong feeling that she

would find Rajjan sitting with papa when she entered. There was strong possibility that she had missed him in the crowded station or may be he had not recognized her and come straight home.

Dusk had enveloped the houses in darkness and there was a nip in the air. The lights from one or two houses seemed to be staring at the dark and uninhabited corners of the lane. Kirti's own house was dimly lit and it appeared mysterious, almost haunted, even to her. Rajjan has come after so many years, if we don't light up the house now, then when will we? How come Shyamlal is here at this hour? She wondered where he was rushing off to on his bicycle? These were the thoughts crossing her mind as she opened the gate.

Kirti's heart started beating faster. Taking long strides, she quickly crossed the garden and verandah and reached inside. But there was nobody. There were no suitcases or hold alls, nor was there any attaché case with tags of any airline—just the dimly lit, palatial house, where three-four people could easily get lost.

"Kirti!"

She stopped short when she heard her mother call out her name from the far end of the darkened corridor. Her voice sounded eerie and she herself appeared ghostlike standing there.

"Who is it?" papa asked at that instant. "Has Kirti come?"

"Yes, Kirti is back," mother said after a moments silence, during which she glanced towards Kirti and moved on.

That's it! Nobody said a word after that. It was as though nobody had been waiting for her nor did they have any expectations.

For the past twelve days, everybody had been waiting with bated breath at this hour, waiting for Kirti. In fact the first two days papa himself had come along to the station. He had scanned many trains coming from Mumbai. It was only later that they came to know that instead of coming home, Rajjan had gone straight to Delhi---to Ratna's house. In spite of re-scheduling the program many times, there was no news of Rajjan even on the thirteenth day.

Kirti reached her room and for a long time she thought mother would yet again tiptoe to her room and whisper, "Kirti, please go and send a telegram to Rajjan...he has made a joke of everything. It's fine if he was not coming here. Why did he have to write so many letters and make everybody wait?"

.... But mother didn't come...not even to announce dinner. She had sent Shobha instead.

"I met Mrs. Mittal today!"

Kirti said to start a conversation and relieve the tension at the dinner table.

"Where?" mother asked, showing no interest, whatsoever.

"At the station."

"Oh!" mother responded, indifferently.

"She was on her way to Bhopal," saying this Kirti looked at her mother. She saw the reaction she had been expecting. To hear Mrs. Mittal's name and Bhopal mentioned in the same breath caught her off guard. Her hand stopped mid-air with the bite she was about to take. "Who gave you this information?" she asked in amazement.

"Mrs. Mittal herself."

Mother stared at Kirti in silence, letting it all sink in. A funny expression crossed her eyes. Kirti could not make out if it was happiness or utter shock. After a moment she diverted her attention from Kirti to some dark corner of the room. She then simply shrugged, as if to say it was bound to happen, and resumed eating.

For someone who had seen a very determined side of Mrs. Mittal, it was very difficult for them to believe that she had simply given up and returned to the same point for which she had been protesting for all these years.

Mrs. Mittal did not fit the category of an ideal neighbour. For one, her house was located far away and secondly, she always appeared aloof and arrogant. Maybe this was the reason people never really bothered to get to know her. But when Kirti met her, the two of them got along well. It put an end to the mysteriousness surrounding her since her arrival. She had created a certain curiosity among the town folk. They often wondered how a married lady had shifted alone to a new town and also picked up a job there. It was not as if she had any relatives here or even someone she knew. She was living in a rented room and was never seen mixing with others. This was enough to set tongues wagging. People wondered—how could a young woman live alone in a new town? If Mrs. Mittal was really married, how come her husband never visited? Why had she never gone to him in the past three years?

"Why should people be so inquisitive about other people's lives?" Mrs. Mittal posed this question to Kirti on just their second meeting. "Do I need to go about telling everyone that I am married....that there had been a lot of love between us....how Mahesh had suddenly started cheating on me and how I am living alone and still fighting with him over this?"

That day Kirti realized that there were still people in this world who could face any hardship but had not learnt to bend or compromise.

Within two years of their love marriage, Mahesh got involved in an affair. Any self-respecting woman would have done what Mrs. Mittal had done.

Kirti sensed her mother was also thinking about that particular day—when Mrs. Mittal had dropped by after Shobha's birthday party. Mother suddenly got up and went to the other room and came back with her arms laden with some old and expensive clothes. She spread them in front of Mrs. Mittal and asked, "Do you know how to mend clothes?"

Mrs. Mittal laughed and answered in the negative.

"These were given to me on my marriage," mother said, "and some might be even older. I take them out of the trunk once in a while to air them. It saddens me if any of them have developed a tear. So I simply mend them and put them right back. I can't wear such clothes at my age and the girls laugh at the thought of being seen in them."

Mrs. Mittal picked up one sari at a time and admired the intricate gold and silver work woven on them.

"When are you going to Bhopal?" mother asked suddenly and without warning. Kirti saw the blood drain from Mrs. Mittal's face but she managed to compose herself and answered, "There is no such program as of now...why?"

"What do you mean why?" mother retorted. "Your husband is not the only one in this world who is having an affair. For how long do you think you can fight alone? When you have something precious and you truly love it, it is very difficult to give it up. Look at me..."

Using the old saris as an example, mother came up with some more worldly matters, all of them pointed in one direction. When Mrs. Mittal could take it no more, she got up and left the room. From where Kirti was sitting, she could see Mrs. Mittal wiping her tears, before she came back to the room. There was anger and humiliation written all over her face. For a long moment, she did not say a word. Kirti tried to console her using her mother's sermonizing tone, which seemed to anger Mrs. Mittal even more. To control herself, she plucked the flower she had pinned to her hair and started stroking the petals. She was deep in thought, as if weighing her words. Finally she pierced one petal and held it out and asked, "Can you mend this..."

Mother saw Kirti pull back her hand and quickly intervened, "Go and have your dinner."

"Switch off the lights before going to bed," mother called out to Kirti as she left the room. "I don't want to be bothered later. And if Shobha insists, let her sleep with you."

There had been no mention of Rajjan. Not even a word.

Many times that night, Kirti felt as though mother had come into

her room. Kirti had woken with a start, but there was no one there. In the silence, she kept hearing her parents tossing and turning restlessly, all through the night.

For the last thirteen days, everybody had been in a festive mood, waiting for Rajjan. The irony was that when he did come, there was no one to receive him at the door. It was three in the morning and the entire household was fast asleep. When Kirti went to papa's room to inform him, he woke up with a' start, arms flailing, trying to look for his walking stick. He then stood up and opened his arms wide.

Rajjan stepped forward and touched his feet. Ratna followed close behind.

"You really made us wait," mother wanted to say when her blessings were sought—"if only you knew what we have been going through for the past so many days," but she could not bring herself to voice her thoughts. Nobody said anything. Shobha came in at that moment and the noise of the re-union could have easily woken up even the neighbours.

"Shobha! Just look how you have grown!"

"Did you expect her to remain the same?" mother said.

"Ratna, do you remember," Rajjan was saying, "she was so small when we left. And just look at Kirti. She has turned into a lady."

"Don't forget, I have completed my M.A." Kirti said. "Also, I have become a lecturer and that I am now earning as much as you. Rajjan, when you go back to England, take me with you."

"O.k.! O.k.!!" Rajjan teased.

In all this excitement, only Kirti noticed her father, how his raised arms just fell to his sides.

"Look, I have brought so many presents for everyone!" Rajjan said as he got up to open his luggage and eagerly spread out the gifts. Mother's suggestion that it could be done in the morning, fell on deaf ears—a cardigan for papa, games and toys for Shobha and sweaters and scarves for Kirti-Nalini!

Ratna kept mentioning that they had scoured so many shops throughout London and picked up each piece very carefully.

Papa looked at everyone through blind eyes, feeling like a stranger within his own family.

The day dawned, and everything was just like it used to be so many years back. News travelled that Rajjan had come and people started coming in hordes to meet him—papa's friends, women known to mother, Kirti and Shobha's friends and the largest number was that of Rajjan's childhood and school-going friends.

"Now spending time with you is pointless" papa's companion of years said. Papa reacted with a shocked, "Why?"

"How long do you think you are here?" Papa's other friend, Saxena, asked. "Just a few more days, right? Rajjan is here to take you with him. And he is not going to take no for an answer."

"Oh! That...." papa sighed with relief and laughed. "Lets see what happens. He has been trying to persuade me for a long time, but I have not agreed as yet. Sometimes I feel I should go, but then lose courage. I have not consulted any doctor here for this reason...but if you ask me truthfully, Sharmaji, the thought of leaving my homeland fills me with dread."

"It's not as if you are going forever!" Sharmaji said. "Come back when treatment is over."

Papa was lost in thought, as if deciding there and then whether he should go with Rajjan or not. It was apparent that Sharmaji, Saxena and all others thought that the sole purpose of Rajjan's visit was to take his father along. And why shouldn't they? Not only his wife and kids, but he himself had been telling people this. Nobody knew the truth, and whenever it croosed his mind made father very restless. There was just one thought nagging him, like a slippery snake slithering on a moss-covered wall—what if Rajjan had forgotten his promise? Since his arrival, he seemed to have just completed formality by asking about his eyes...nothing else was mentioned. He just needs to relax after such a long journey and then he will surely ask...he thought.

At night, mother asked him to have his dinner, "Rajjan and Ratna have gone out and I don't think they will be back soon."

"I will still wait," papa said. "If Kirti and Shobha are hungry, let them eat."

But nobody was hungry. Like the night before, they all waited for Rajjan and Ratna till late. When tired of waiting, Shobha went off to sleep...hungry.

Parties and movies...

Barring the first afternoon, Rajjan's consecutive days were mostly spent either attending parties, or watching movies. He had no time even to catch a breath and was beginning to feel he had made a mistake coming home. The list of his friends and other acquaintances wanting to meet him was almost unending. If he tried to turn down an invitation, he was baggered with complaints.

"Rajjan was talking about leaving for London," Kirti overheard her mother telling papa.

"Whose going with him?" father asked expectantly. "Me?"

"No," mother said softly, as she looked away. "He was just talking about himself. He mentioned something about having to spend a couple of days more in Delhi as some work had come up. That means he will have to cut his visit short."

Father was quiet for a long time.

"What about their trip to Banaras to meet Nalini?"

"They are not going there now."

"Why?"

"They don't have the time," mother said. "They even cancelled their trip to Jaipur to meet his maternal uncle. Ratna was saying that we should send their presents by courier. He has come after so many years and returning without even meeting his sister. Just imagine how Nalini will feel!"

Papa was quiet once again.

"Did Rajjan say anything else?"

"About what?" mother asked, looking at papa. Seeing his expression, she quickly checked herself and added, "He has no time to even sit with me for a while. But yesterday he did ask if you had liked the coat."

Kirti heard the bed creak and knew that her father was restless again.

Coming out of the station, Kirti breathed a sigh of relief. She felt the tension of so many days finally ebb away. It was funny, though, that seeing off Rajjan and Ratna had not saddened her. On the contrary, she felt light. It was more like a person of a low status would feel on seeing off some guests of a higher status.

Before leaving, Rajjan and Ratna bid farewell, but the way things had turned out, Kirti felt their words of endearment were hollow and she just could not get herself to reciprocate. She wished she could do what Rajjan had asked her. Many times she had even prepared herself to start the topic with Ratna, but her conscience would not allow it and she was rendered helpless.

While waiting for the train, Rajjan took Kirti aside on some pretext and said, "I need a small favour from you."

"What?"

"In all honesty, you are the only person I can talk to. Not just because you are my sister, but also because you are a mature and intelligent person... what's wrong with mother and father? We came after so many years and it didn't feel as if anybody was happy about our home coming. Papa mostly had unpleasant things to say and mother was always grim. Never mind about what I felt, I belong to this family. But Ratna was

very hurt. She said that nobody even appreciated the presents, which we got with so much love. Papa, for example, didn't even touch the coat. Could you somehow convince her that her feelings are baseless and everybody really liked the presents..."

Kirti knew Rajjan was not asking for much, but she still could not get herself to comply, "What's the matter with me?" she thought. Even though it would be a lie, could she not molly coddle Ratna....

"So? What else did she tell you?" Rama Sen asked, placing her hand on Kirti's shoulder. Kirti was jolted out of her daydream and was somewhat upset with herself. How could she have forgotten all about Rama Sen travelling with her? Since they were going in the same direction, they thought of sharing a taxi. And whom was she asking about? Kirti wondered and then answered herself—Oh! Yes, Mrs. Mittal! They had been talking about her since they left the station. Whether you liked it or not, whether the place was appropriate or not, the conversations always revolved around Mrs. Mittal.

"She said she would be back in three to four days."

"She said the same thing to me," Rama Sen said, "but I knew from the start that she is not going to come back and one day just send her resignation letter. As far as I know, Kirti, the fact is that when you love someone so dearly, it is very difficult to hate that person even if he has hurt you. When I saw an educated woman like Mrs. Mittal get upset over a bad omen like the breaking of her bangles, I knew her resolve was broken."

Kirti was getting bored. Right now she had no interest whatsoever, in Mrs. Mittal. She stuck her head out of the taxi window and wondered how much longer it would take to reach home. She was getting tired of Rama Sen's non-stop talking.

Fear engulfed her again as she approached her house.

Her steps did not falter today as she entered the gate—but a familiar feeling of fear, which had been dormant until now, began to resurface. The same darkness surrounding the houses, the lights peeping from one or two houses, the silent and uninhabited corners of the lane...and her very dimly lit house.

Sneaking unto the verandah like a thief, Kirti remembered that tonight even Shobha would not be home. She had left with their maternal aunt, who had come to meet Rajjan and Ratna. The house felt even emptier and she could very well imagine the scene inside. Father had not even come to the door to bid farewell to Rajjan so it was pointless to expect he would get up from his bed.... And mother? She would have chosen a dark corner of the house to lie down.

Kirti was tired. In a way it was good Shobha was not at home. All she wanted now was to avoid confronting her parents and just run to her room to crash on the bed. She managed to cross the corridor but stopped short when she saw the lights on in her father's room.

She hesitated and stopped just at the door.

"Who is it?" papa called out at that moment.

Kirti didn't want her presence known. She stood against the wall, very quiet.

Mother looked towards the door and seeing or hearing nothing, replied, "There is no one there,"

"I thought maybe Kirti had returned."

Hearing this, Kirti could not stop herself. She did not care if it was immoral; she just wanted to peep into their room while passing by. Doing so, she stopped in her tracks, dumbfounded by what she saw—papa was wearing the same coat, which he had not even touched in Rajjan's presence. In front of him stood mother, wearing her cardigan. Papa had his hand on her shoulder and his fingers were running to feeling the texture of the cardigan and he was asking, "What colour is it? Blue?"

Translated from Hindi by Amrit Sidhu

❑

Militants

Sudarshan Ratanpuri

Sitting on the platform of the big banyan tree in the bazaar, Kasturi was lost in thought. She had been there for a long time and was worried as to why nobody had turned up to buy her load of firewood. One or two men had passed that way, enquired the price and moved on. She had called to them, "How much will you pay?" But they had paid no heed and had gone ahead without giving a reply.

As time passed, she grew anxious. She looked up towards the sky. The sun had moved westward. She, a woman, was quite some distance away from her village and she would have to trudge the distance through deserted wilderness. The thought made her nervous. She decided to sell her load at whatever price she got and rush homeward hastily.

There were very few people in the bazaar today. She asked a man who passed that way, "Brother, what's the matter? Today the whole bazaar appears emptied."

"You don't know?" The man looked hard at Kasturi.

"No! I don't know. Please, tell me. I came here from the village a little before noon with this load of firewood."

"That's why. How would you know?" said the man, shaking his head.

"Please tell me what happened here." Kasturi asked anxiously. "Pray tell me why the bazaar looks so deserted," Kasturi asked again.

"What could've happened?" The man took a long breath and said, "Times are bad. One can't say anything. One comes out from his house but he does not know whether he will get back home or not."

Kasturi assented. "Where have those times gone when one could go anywhere anytime without any fear? But today!" Kasturi stopped for a while and then said, "But what has happened here that the gaiety and busy hum of shoppers have disappeared?"

The man heaved a cold sigh and said, "There was a bomb explosion in Sabzi Mandi this morning, killing some people and wounding many more. This incident has created a scare in the whole city and people have shut themselves in their homes and the whole city looks bereft of its activity."

"I see," nodded Kasturi, "such a thing never happened earlier. Always, the moment I put my load of firewood on this platform, people came up in a line. And today?"

"Who would've come today to take your firewood? Today people sitting in their homes are wondering what next." The man stopped for a while and then added, "Today human life has become so cheap. Killing a man is no more than killing a chicken."

"It seems so," replied Kasturi, "who would've done this? What sort of a man is he who is spilling human blood in lanes and bazaars?"

"Who else? Only some people from across the line of control who have no respect for their religion. Greed for money is turning these people into militants and making them play with the lives of human beings." Saying this, the man walked away.

Kasturi kept standing there and wondering, thinking of this and that. She was thinking that if there had been some forewarning of what was going to happen, such a thing would not have taken place. But now what should she do. What can be done. I cannot leave this load of firewood here and I don't know anyone or any place in the city where I can spend the night.

She started feeling vexed, annoyed with herself. Why did I quarrel with Bhikkhu? What use was it? You need a child, a tiny prattler in the house. At one time I myself had thought of getting my own younger sister married to Bhikkhu. I could not. She could bring some liveliness in the family. I was still thinking about it when I came to know Bhikkhu had established relationship with Taro. This information struck my heart like an arrow. I was his married wife and he did not consider it necessary to consult me about it. My need for a baby was as great as his. Not a whisper of it from him and he quietly went ahead and married Taro. This was something that rankled in my heart and it created tension and disquiet and wrangling between me and Bhikkhu.

And one day Bhikkhu told me, "Kasturi, you can remain in this house and have your two *bhathoras*[1] quietly, but don't create fuss in the house."

"It is you who have created all the fuss. Are you not ashamed of telling me off?" I had shot back. After a pause I had added, "As for two *bhathoras*, I can earn them by selling firewood. But remember,

Bhathora — fried leavened chapattis.

if you bring my co-wife Taro in this house, it will be the end of our relationship."

Bhikkhu did not care and brought Taro to live in the house. Bhikkhu tried his best to assuage her feelings. He said, "Look, we have been married for ten long years and you have not produced a baby. You may not want to have one, but I want someone to call me *Bapu*. There should be a heir to our lands and property."

Kasturi did not heed his advice, his pleadings. Every day she went to the forest, collected firewood, bundled it and carried the bundle to the city market. Thus she started meeting her own expenses with what she earned. It had gone on for some time like this.

Her reverie was suddenly broken when someone said, "How much for this firewood?".

"Whatever you please," she replied. Now it was a matter of getting a load off her head. She took what was given to her and tied the amount in a corner of her *dupatta*. Then she started worrying as to how she would get home. The sun was gathering up its glare from the top of trees and announcing the arrival of the night. She looked around and spotted the Sarpanch of her village at some distance, coming towards her. She felt relieved. She ran up to the Sarpanch and said, "Sarpanchji, I bow to you."

"Be happy." Then casting his look all around, he asked Kasturi, "What are you doing here at this time? It is evening and soon it will be night."

Kasturi told her tale to the Sarpanch with tears in her eyes. Listening to her narration, the Sarpanch's eyes got riveted on Kasturi's bosom, visible through her torn shirt.

"Don't worry. I myself have to go to the village. You may come with me." Then after a pause, "I've some work with the Tehsildar. I'll be back after finishing it."

After talking to the Sarpanch, Kasturi's face had brightened. She kept standing there, waiting for him. She had no fear in her mind now. Being with the Sarpanch, she felt safe enough. Slowly, dusk was turning into dark, but she was not worried about gathering darkness.

The Sarpanch came after some time and both of them took the path that led to the village. After covering some distance, the Sarpanch left the beaten path and entered the untrodden tract along the dry stream with some clumps of trees on its bank.

Kasturi was surprised a bit to see the Sarpanch going that way and asked, "Sarpanchji, why are you moving away from the beaten path, to walk on the untrodden ground?"

The Sarpanch replied, "Kasturi, you don't know that some militants have infiltrated into this area, you never know when one of them lurking around may emerge from somewhere. These clumps will come handy to hide and save our lives. Someone can see us on the beaten track from a distance, but who will notice us in this untrodden ground? We'll be taken for only shadows of some trees," said the Sarpanch, "you understand?"

After remaining silent for a while, he added, "If there is sound of some movement, sit down behind a clump of trees immediately."

"Yes," nodded Kasturi and said, "you are right, Sarpanchji, I understand."

Both of them continued to walk together, side by side. After they had gone some distance, they heard the sound of some movement.

The Sarpanch said, "Kasturi, come here behind this grove. Who knows, there may be some militant around."

Frightened, Kasturi stood behind a clump. Both of them were standing close to each other. Their breaths fell on each other's face. The Sarpanch extended his arm and enfolded Kasturi. Kasturi tried hard to release herself, but she couldn't do a thing and then...

The next day, the whole village was talking about Kasturi, returning from the city, having been waylaid and killed by. militants.

Translated from Dogri by Shivanath

❑

The Origin

Habib Kamran

It is an old story, familiar to every one.

Once upon a time a King of Kashmir was seated in his court, surrounded by courtiers, when the city *Kotwal* entered with his men. They had brought in two women and a child, whom they produced before the King. The *Kotwal* bowed deeply and began, "Great and Noble King! These two women were found fighting with each other over this child outside the Royal Palace. This child would have been torn in two for sure, pulled as he was by them both in opposite directions, or these witches themselves would have been stoned to death by the agitated mob, had I not arrested them at once and brought them before your Majesty. Each of them claims to be this child's mother; they are vehement in their protestations and refuse to yield their right over him. Your Royal Majesty alone can settle the issue and restore the child to his real mother."

The King observed the women and the child and then looked at his minister. The minister asked one woman to state her case. Beating her chest, she cried, "Great and Omnipotent King! This *Kotwal* lies! He did not arrest us, we were coming ourselves to plead the case before our King, when he ran after us. I am Zoonmal and this is my son, my heart, the light of my eyes. I have given birth to him and he belongs to me!"

The King glanced at the other woman, and she too beat her chest and cried, "Oh Just King! I am Heemal. Zoonmal lies! This child is the strength of my limbs, a part of my body, my own flesh and blood, sprung from my womb! He only belongs to me and no one else.

The King asked Zoonmal whether she could produce a witness in her favour, and she replied, "My Majestic Lord! I am a shepherdess, who lives in a far meadow, where there are no neighbours, friends or

relatives living around. How can I produce a witness?"

The King turned to Heemal and asked her whether she had a witness to support her claim. She said, "My Royal Lord! I too am a shepherdess living on the same high pasture that Zoonmal lives in. The only neighbour or acquaintance that I have there is this very Zoonmal. I can produce no other witness to my right over this child."

The king gave orders that the child's father be brought before him. Zoonmal again beat her breast, threw herself on the floor and wailed, "Oh if only the departed one were alive! Wouldn't he then have settled the issue himself? My husband and this child's father was one Sona—a shepherd. We lived in the high pastures, tending our stock. One day a terrible storm rose, thunder and lightning set off terror among our flock and it got scattered. Sona went looking for the sheep in that dreadful weather, trying to gather them back together. But he never returned, he had fallen prey to a tiger."

Now the King turned to Heemal and asked her whether she could call the child's father to come forward.

Heemal began to weep and tear her hair in grief, "Had he been alive would he have stood by and watched silently while Zoonmal tried to commit this deed? Sona, the shepherd was not just Zoonmal's husband, he was mine too. I was his second—no, no, Zoonmal was his second wife. Both of us are the widows of that same Sona, who went looking for the flock and never returned."

The King gave orders for the child to be tied tightly to a log of wood and the log should then be sawn in two, so that the child would get evenly divided into two pieces from top to toe. One piece each should then be handed over to the two women claiming him.

The soldiers tied the child to the log. The executioners came and began to saw the log. Seeing this, Zoonmal screamed and clawing her face in grief, burst out, "Oh Great King, don't do this! Don't let this happen to my beloved son before my very eyes. Alas! Has an innocent child ever been subjected to such torture? My Exalted Lord, I surrender before Heemal's claim! Let her keep him so that he can live and blossom like a rose. My eyes will feel soothed even with an occasional glimpse of him."

The King said, "Tell me, who is the child's mother?"Zoonmal replied, "May I die for him! What would I not do for sake? The child is mine, but I would wish my eyes to go blind rather than see him being cut into two pieces! That is why I say that let him be handed over to Heemal."

On the other hand, Heemal too had raised an outcry, beating her breast and weeping, "O Just King, don't let the beloved of my heart

die so cruelly before my eyes! What shall I do? Boiling oil is burning my innards! How can I bear to see his milky white, tender body under the teeth of the saw? I am ready to withdraw my plea, quite willing for Zoonmal to have custody of the child. Let her raise him, I will be content merely by watching him, even if only from a distance." The King asked her too, "But who has actually borne him?" Heemal said, "My Good King, I have given birth to him, but I am leaving him to Zoonmal. Let him live and prosper, with her!"

The King declared, "First Zoonmal was saying that the child was hers and so was Heemal. Each persistently claimed to be the real mother, but now, in order to save the child's life, each is ready to forego her claim—Zoonmal wants him to go to Heemal and Heemal, for her part, wants him to go to Zoonmal. But it is still not clear whose child he really is, so how can we give him to one or the other woman? The only thing to do, in order to be fair and just, is to divide the child's body into two and hand one piece to each of them."

Saying this, the king beckoned the executioners and once again they began to work the saw on the log. It was about to touch the child's head when Zoonamal screamed, "Oh Compassionate King I am a wicked woman, a wicked liar! Craving for motherhood had blinded me, driven me to lodge a claim over this child, who is not mine. He belongs to Heemal. Please, I beg you to untie him from the log and hand him over to her. It is she who has given birth to him!"

The King gave his orders: Heemal was to get custody of the child and Zoonmal was to be tied to the tail of a fleet-footed horse. It was to be a slow and cruel process, death would only come after her body was torn and battered, limb after limb mauled—only such a punishment was fit for one who had dared to snatch another's child.

But when the judgement fell on Heemal's ears, she began to wring her hands piteously and wailed, "Oh my King, how can Zoonmal be punished so? It is I who is the liar! This child is Zoonmal's! I could not bear the thought that she should have a child in her lap and mine should be barren. That is why I put forth this false claim. Please give the child to her and let me be tied to that horse's tail."

The King said, "It is an extremely complicated case now. And it will not be possible for us to settle the matter in one day. Let the child and these two women be produced in Court tomorrow, so that justice can be done. Meanwhile the child must be kept in the custody of my Prime Minister, and the women lodged in jail."

As the orders were being executed and the two women led to the prison, the King called the Prime Minister to come, and whispered

something in his ear. The Prime Minister bowed his head in submission to the King's desire—his will would be carried out.

Zoonmal and Heemal were in jail, mourning their fate, weeping loudly, when at about midnight there was a knock at the door. It opened to reveal the Prime Minister. He was alone, carrying an earthen pot in hand. He entered the cell, closing the door behind him, and sat down, waiting.

"O Compassionate Sir, what have you done with him, that bright sun of ours?", Zoonmal asked.

"O Wise Sir, where have you kept that rose of our garden?", asked Heemal.

"Your child is sleeping on a royal bed at this time, but this is going to be the last night of his life. Tomorrow in the Royal Court his body will be slashed into two pieces, and each one of you will receive one piece."

This brought forth a stream of tears from the eyes of both women and they begged, "Is there no way, O Sagacious Sir, to spare the precious, dear life of our beloved?"

The Minister said, "What can I do in the matter? The two of you change your story from moment to moment, how can the King believe anything either of you say now? That is why it is difficult for him to arrive at the truth and know who the real mother of the child is. Our judicious King will never let the rights of one to be appropriated by another!"

The women's tears were a cascade now and they spoke in voice, "O Learned, Accomplished Sir, we are just two stupid ignorant women, what can we understand of the King's justice? It is for you to show us a way to save that tender lamb from the teeth of the saw."

He turned to Zoonmal and asked, "Will you accept separation from the child in order to ensure his safety?"

"Separation from the child is like losing my sight, but if this be the only way to save him, I shall turn my heart into stone and bear it!"

The Prime Minister turned to Heemal now, "Will you agree to give up the child and never see him again in order to save his life?"

"Though parting from the child will mean life ebbing from my limbs, but I am ready to bear anything if it should mean his safety!"

"Then listen, both of you. Hand over your child to me and leave this very moment, under cover of darkness for your home in the high pastures."

Again Zoonmal beat her chest and cried, "Who will care for my innocent baby? Who will lull him to sleep, rock his crib? Whose hands will nurture him?"

Clawing her face in grief, Heemal wept, "Who will bathe him, dress him, feed him or sing lullabies to him? Whose breast will give him the warmth of love?"

"It is not for you to worry about that. This child is very fortunate, his stars extremely lucky and auspicious. He will be brought up like a prince, with maids, nurses and nannies to look after his every need. Peacock-feather fans will air him and his body anointed with rare perfumes and scents, he will be dressed in precious brocades and silks. If you only knew the heights to which this child would reach, you would at once give him up willingly and leave him with me. I have nothing more to say to either of you. In fact, I am not allowed to tell you everything."

"Is it really the truth you are telling us, Sir? Will you swear to it in the name of God?"

"I swear in the name of God, who has created me and who is the master of the whole universe!"

"In that case, we are ready to leave him in your care and go back to the high pasture where our home is."

"There is something else—you must never tell anyone about this deal. If even a word leaks out, all of us—the child, the two of you and I—will be cut to pieces by that same saw and no one can save us then! So you must promise that the secret will always be safe with you."

"I shall pull out my tongue, if ever it dares to mention it," said Zoonmal.

"I shall pour molten lead down my throat if ever it dares to breathe of it," said Heemal.

The Minister then brought forward the two earthen pots and said, "Here is a potful of gold coins for you, Zoonmal, and here is another for you, Heemal. Take them with you. It is enough for both of you to live comfortably for the rest of your lives, so you will never have to depend on anyone's charity in future."

The Minister turned to leave and Zoonmal hit her brow with her hand and moaned, "O God, whom shall I feed the milk from my goats and sheep?"

Heemal beat her chest and cried, "Whose neck will I deck with the garlands of roses and honeysuckle I bring home every evening?"

The Minister walked out, but Zoonmal grabbed his sleeve, "I have

agreed with all your suggestions, but please, for God's sake, you must listen to one thing that I suggest."

"Well, what is it?"

"First you must promise that you will do what I ask for."

"I promise. Now hurry up and tell me what it is."

Zoonmal placed the pot of gold coins in his hands and said, "When my darling little bud attains youth, you must give him this and tell him that it was left for him by his mother, Zoonmal".

The Minister was leaving with the pot when Zoonmal called out, "If you ever break the promise given to me, you will have to face me on the Day of Judgement!"

As the Minister was leaving, Heemal grabbed his sleeve and said, "I have agreed to all your terms, now I beg you to listen to one request from me!"

The Minister was angry now, " I am very late! Hurry up and say what it is."

Heemal brought her pot of gold coins forward and said, "When that priceless pearl of mine grows up, please give this to him and tell him that it had been left for him by his mother, Heemal."

The Minister said, "No,no, that is not possible. How can I do it? I am bound by a promise already made, how can I do what you ask for?"

"If you don't agree, I shall appeal to the King himself, first thing in the morning!"

The Minister lost his colour. Very frightened now, he said, "Clearly, the Angel of Death is hovering above your head, and you want to take me along too! Get going, you two! Not even your shadow must be seen in this town after day-break. For God's sake, go! Oh how do I make you understand the consequences of your lingering here?"

"Then you too must do what I ask, for God's sake", said Heemal.

"All right, I agree. After all, who knows what the future holds?", saying this, the Minister took back the other pot of gold.

The Minister left, with Heemal's parting words ringing in his ears, "Listen, if you break faith, I will grab you by the throat on the Day of Judgement!"

The next day came the public announcement that the Queen had delivered a baby boy, and the people were asked to celebrate the happy event for a whole month. The King had been childless so far, so his subjects' joy knew no bounds at an heir to the kingdom being born. The music of shehnai and the drum filled the air everywhere. While the married women put on festive clothes, maidens sang and danced in joy.

Professional dancing girls in red garments whirled away, abandoning themselves to the general spirit of rejoicing. Lamps were lit to illuminate every corner of the kingdom. There was a shower of flowers everywhere. Outside the palace the scene was that of a magnificent fair with loud music and boisterous crowds, who came to offer their greetings to the King, being rewarded with fistfuls of diamonds and pearls and handfuls of gold mohurs, in return.

The prince was given the name of Jahandad Shah. The Queen would not tire of holding him in her lap, fondling him all the time. There were maids to fan him. Well-known *pirs* and *faqirs* were asked to weave charms to tie on his arm to ward off the evil eye. Wet nurses suckled him and he was weaned on honey and milk.

With the passage of time, the prince grew up, learning well the ways and duties of Royalty. Meanwhile the King's age advanced and soon the day came when he could no longer discharge the tough responsibility of running the kingdom. Suddenly he became aware of his mortality and began to think of preparing to face his Maker. He called for his trusted Minister, and said to him, "My wise Minister, how can I ever repay you for all that you have done for me all these years? There is nothing with me which is of value to equal your dedicated service to me. There were so many problems I faced during my rule, so many ups and downs! But your advice saw me sail through all of them, without mishap. It was such a long reign and old age has now brought me low—I can no longer cope. I may not have long to live, so I must prepare for the other world. I have decided to hand over the reigns to my son, Prince Jahandad. What is your opinion?"

The Minister bowed his head and said, "My High Principled Lord, who am I to have displayed exceptional dedication, or wisdom? Let your blessed presence stay with us always and let your power never be diminished! Our Jahandad Shah is so wise, so brave and courageous a prince that I find myself a pigmy in his presence. God keep him, he is very well equipped to handle all the responsibilities that a ruler of this kingdom must shoulder."

The King then handed over his sceptre and crown to Prince Jahandad and left for the forest where he took up residence in a cave, giving himself up to meditating on God.

Jahandad's reign saw the kingdom prosper even more than before. His glory struck terror in all his enemies. No one dared to raise a malicious eye towards any of his territories. His people were at peace, secure from all quarters; their king was a just and generous ruler and they sent up earnest prayers to God to keep him well.

Even as the new ruler grew from strength to strength, the old Minister grew older and feebler with the passage of time. His back was no longer straight, eyesight grown dim, now he was even hard of hearing. One day he presented himself before the King and said, "My most dear Lord, you must be thinking of me as one consumed by greed, as someone, though one foot in the grave, continues to immerse himself in worldly affairs, having forgotten his duties to God. But to tell you the truth, it was my most fervent wish to renounce the world and go with your venerated father the old King, to meditate and purify my spirit. It is a long time since he kicked away his royal privilege and power, but I am still chained to my office. The reason is not greed or ambition, but there is a burden, which I cannot relieve myself of, while it is becoming increasingly difficult for me to carry it any more. The King alone, with his love and grace, can save me from this predicament."

"My Wise and Faithful Minister, all that you have done in serving the Kingdom, both during my father's time and mine, is greatly valued by us. We can also understand that due to advancing age you might not be finding it easy to carry the burden of office any more. Though your wisdom has been our guiding light, it does not mean that for our own convenience and comfort, we should continue to exploit you and force you to carry on even when advancing age makes the task difficult for you. If you should feel like giving up your job, we cannot stop you, but rest assured, you will continue to enjoy the same status and prestige in the Kingdom that you do now. You will continue to draw the same salary and perks as long as you are alive, so there is no need for you to worry on any score."

"Oh Highly Principled Monarch, thanks to your munificence and that of your father the King, I lack nothing. The cause of my worry is something else, something which I can only reveal to Your Majesty in private."

The Minister was given permission to appear before the King in the privacy of his chamber, with no one else present. He came and placed the two pots of gold coins before him.

"Gracious, Beloved King , when you were only a suckling babe, two women came to me and handed over these two pots of gold coins to me with the request that when you grew up, I should offer them to you on their behalf. I have been keeping them in trust all these years, and now let me hand over what belongs to you. This was the weight I carried on my mind, which had stolen my peace of mind. I had given them a promise that I would do so. They had warned me that if I broke faith, I would have to answer for it on the Day of Judgement."

Jahandad Shah was astounded. "Who were these women? What was their purpose in doing so? Didn't they know that kings do not require such gifts? And if they wanted to make an offering, why didn't they make it to the King my father, at that time?"

The minister was lost for words, but recovering, he said, "My own opinion is that they were not mentally sound, in fact they were two mad women."

Jahandad Shah was very bright. It did not take him long to guess that the minister was hiding something, unwilling to tell the truth, preferring to tell a diplomatic lie. He asked, "How should two mad women acquire pots of gold? And would a wise man like you leave it at that, making no effort to investigate the matter? Why should they hand over pots of gold to you and ask you to give them to me when I reached adulthood, even go to the extent of holding out the threat of retribution if you didn't do their bidding? What made them so fond of me? And more than anything else, why did you hesitate so long before coming to me with this gift? Listen, if you are so concerned about the other world, you must think about this world first—if you don't tell me the truth, the whole truth, plain and simple, you are doomed!"

The minister knew that it wouldn't be easy to fool an intelligent, perceptive man like Jahandad, by weaving a web of words before him. He had no choice but to relate the whole sequence of events exactly as it had unfolded itself.

The revelation of the truth was a bolt from the blue for Jahandad. He was speechless with horror. But he was a king after all, able to exercise self-control and hide the turmoil in his heart. After a long silence, he spoke, "My wise and resourceful Minister, did you finally find out who, between the two, Zoonmal and Heemal, was my real mother?"

"My King, my adored Prince! Is not our great, noble Queen, who nurtured and doted on you all these years since you grew up from infancy to youth, your mother? She, who held you to her heart, nourished you with her love and had you crowned as a king, she alone is your mother," there was a touch of reproach in the minister's voice.

"The Queen of course. What woman other than the Queen of this land could be my mother? Her status cannot be usurped by anyone—I am her son, surely. But after the heartrending truth you told me today, I *must* know who actually gave birth to me. I have to discover my true identity, find out where my origin is. Till I do so, my crown, my life, my very existence is useless, utterly meaningless."

"My Lord, you were destined to be king—nature itself arranged it so. Please listen to me, forget the past."

"One may succeed in deceiving others by hiding ones real identity, but not oneself. Haven't you seen clowns putting up a comic performance outside the palace every year? With one playing the role of a king, another a minister, a third someone else? But they know who they really are. It seems that I must also think of myself as one of those jokers now. I have to know who my real mother is, whose womb I was carried in and delivered from, otherwise there is no purpose to my life."

The minister gave the matter some thought and said, "There is just one way, and that is to call both Zoonmal and Heemal here. The King himself can then ascertain the truth from them."

"Do you think they are still alive?"

"I know they are alive. I also know where their home in the high pastures is—I have kept in touch with them all these years—so fetching them should not be difficult. I shall arrange it myself."

Messengers were dispatched and within a few days both the women, Zoonmal and Heemal were brought to the palace. Jahandad Shah had been told by the minister that the two women would constantly change their statements in each other's presence, so he gave orders that they should be lodged in separate rooms, neither of them must know where the other was, nor should any means of communication between the two be provided to them. The king also gave orders that they must receive royal treatment, fit for queens.

After a few days, Jahandad Shah went to see Zoonmal and said, "Zoonmal, try to recall that day when you were found quarelling with Heemal over a child at this place. You claimed the child as your own and so did Heemal and the matter was brought before the King, who too could not decide who the mother was and thus did not know who the child should be given to. Finally you left the child with the King's minister. Do you remember?"

"Great King, I am so old, my memory feeble, how should I remember anything now? I have no idea of the child you mention—I have never had a quarrel with anyone over any matter, nor have ever I come here before."

"The child you left with the minister that day was put in her own lap by the Queen! Take a good look at me—I am that child."

Zoonmal looked at him and said, "My darling Prince, my dearest son, may your days increase a millionfold! Let my days be added to yours and make you eternal! May the waters of paradise make you blossom for ever! Who but you deserved to wear this crown?"

"I only want to know one thing from you—who was it that gave birth to me? Was it Heemal or you?"

"My beloved son, ask me nothing! Why do you want me to pull out my own tongue by the root?"

"But why should you do that?"

"Because I have given a promise— I must pull out my tongue before it can dare to speak of it."

"But who could have made you give this promise?"

"No, my Prince. I seal my lips. Not a word more shall I utter."

Disheartened and frustrated, Jahandad left. Then he went to Heemal'a chamber, and asked, "Do you remember that child, Heemal, whom you and Zoonmal left with the King's minister? The child over whom you two were quarrelling, both claiming to be his mother? And the King himself had been unable to decide who the child should be given to, between the two of you?"

Heemal answered, "Majestic King, can death and sorrows leave memory intact? What child are you talking about? I have no idea at all."

"The child I am talking about, is a grown up man now, and he is standing before you. I am that child."

"My beloved Prince!! God grant you life and success for ever! My darling son, let me die for you! May you always be safe from the evil eye, eternally in bloom! Who but you deserved to wear these royal robes?"

"Please do me a favour, Heemal, and tell me who actually gave birth to me. Was it Zoonmal or you?"

"Better to pour molten lead down my throat rather than ask me to answer you, my adored Prince!"

"But what is the reason? Why do you want your throat sealed?"

"Because I have promised! Before a word of what you are asking to know about is breathed out by it, I shall myself pour molten lead down my throat!"

"Alas! Does it mean that I my desire to know will always remain unfulfilled?"

Heemal said, "You, a royal prince! And the two of us, just ordinary shepherdesses from a far-off pasture! What will you gain from us? Why put these questions to *us*?"

"Because I want to know! I must know who gave birth to me. I must know who I actually am."

"Light of my eyes! I would have told you, but my lips have been sealed, so much the worse for me!", said Heemal.

Jahandad hit his brow in frustration and appealed to Heemal again, "At least tell me one thing—who made the two of you give this promise?"

"It was your Minister, Noble King, the same minister who sent for us and on whose behest we have come here."

The next day the Minister was summoned to the King's private chamber.

"The two simple souls from the high pasture have sealed their lips. It seems that someone has extracted a promise from them both that the truth will never be breathed by them."

"My Great King, I am the guilty one—it is I who made them promise."

Jahandad gave his Minister a hard look and a tremor went through the Minister's body.

"I had to do it— had the truth become public, it would have been a calamity. God only knows how many would have perished!"

"And you would have been among the ones who perished!"

"Most certainly! The King your father, would certainly have had me cut into pieces with that saw."

"And that made you cover up the truth for ever! But tell me, what happens to one who is put under the teeth of a saw?"

The Minister trembled in agitation and said, "Our King is wise and knowledgeable, why does he need me to tell him?"

"The one who is brought under a saw will die even before the first tooth pierces through him. He will thus be released from all pain and suffering. But what about the one whose body has been divided into two by a saw and yet continues to live?"

The Minister's face was drained of all colour, it seemed to have turned blue. Trembling in fear, he stuttered, "But...but, is such a thing possible?"

"It is. And you are standing before such a one now—I am the one to whom it has happened."

"Beloved Prince! That is why I had begged you to forget the past."

"If it had been possible to forget the past, those two pots of gold would not have appeared before me— I mean the pots that those two shepherdesses had given you for me—and my soul would not have been in such torment!"

The next day, on Jahandad Shah's orders, the Minister was brought under the teeth of the saw, his body sliced in two. And then once again, Jahandad stood before Zoonmal and asked, "I ask you once again to give me the answer to the question I had put you the other day. You must answer me now."

Again Zoonmal gave him the same reply—let him pull out her tongue by the root before she could utter a single word and break faith.

"Don't be afraid. The person to whom you had made the promise is nowhere now. He is gone."

Startled, Zoonmal asked, "What happened to him? Where did he go?"

"He is dead."

"Lord have mercy! Dead, is he? But that Great King, before whose throne of Justice Heemal and I were brought that day, is he all right?"

"My Noble father, our King is all right, God keep us under his benevolent presence for ever! It is his grace that enables us to survive on this land!"

Zoonmal stood silent, with her head bowed.

"Answer me I say! Was it Heemal or you that gave birth to me?"

"Noble King! Would a poor, lowly shepherdess—living on Godforsaken heights—ever have had the good fortune to produce a son like you? So handsome, so majestic in bearing, brought up in a palace with royalty as company, wearing the crown of a King? How could I ever be your mother, my Beloved King?"

"So you admit that you are not my mother!"

"Oh my Heart and Soul, is it possible for anyone in the world to deny it, if she should be called mother by you?"

"This is no answer to my query! Give me a plain and straight reply."

"I know nothing. Please go and ask Heemal, she might be able to tell you something to make you happy and set your heart at rest."

Jahandad went into deep thought for a while and then said, "I have already questioned her."

Zoonmal was in a panic. Pale with fear, she asked, "What did she say?"

"She said that she was my real mother, the one who had actually given birth to me, and that Zoonmal had made a false claim on me."

"Yes, Oh yes! Zoonmal told you the truth, my dear. The jewel that we had handed over to the Minister that day was certainly born of that same Heemal. Just as he emerged from the womb, I put him in my lap and held him to my breast. I was the one who bathed him and swaddled him in a piece of *tush* spun with my own hand, held him under the folds of my *pheran* to keep out the cold, let him sleep on my breast to give him a soft bed, fed him on the sweet milk of the goats and ewes lest he feel hungry. That is why I had said that he was my son."

"Is that the truth, then?"

"Yes, that is the truth, my Heart and Soul! May my life be sacrificed for you!"

Soon after, Jahandad stood before Heemal and asked, "Answer the question that I had asked you earlier, Heemal!"

"But I told you that I was helpless and could not give you any answer."

"Don't be afraid! The man, that minister who had forced you to keep your mouth shut is no longer in the world. He is dead."

"What, the poor fellow is dead? Alas for him! What about that great King, who had gone into that case involving me and Zoomal, is he well and living?"

"Long live my father the King. It is he who is the light of this country."

Heemal stood silent, with bowed head.

Jahandad demanded, "Now tell me who my real mother is.Was it Zoonmal or you who gave birth to me?"

"Would a wretched shepherdess deserve to be the mother of a prince, radiant like the sun as you are? How could I be your mother?"

"Then who was I born of?"

"What can I say? Why don't you ask Zoonmal? She is the one who knows and can tell you the truth."

Jahandad thought for some time and then spoke, "I have already asked her."

Suddenly Heemal seemed to have been washed over by a saffron dye, pale from head to toe. Panic-stricken, she burst out, "What did she say, my beloved prince?"

"She said that she was my real mother, not you."

"Of course she told you the truth. The bright gem that we handed over to the minister that day was born from Zoonmal's womb. The moment it happened, I took him in my arms and he reigned over my heart. It was I who lulled him to sleep, rocked his cradle day and night, made garlands of poppies and jasmine to deck his neck, and fed him on lumps of sugar candy. It was this that made me say he was my son."

Jahandad's eyes began to glow like burning coals and he said, "You are two lying, deceitful women!"

"What? Am I not telling you the truth, my son?"

"You lie! Zoonmal never told me any of this. I just made it up to test how truthful you are."

"Star of my life! If it is not true that Zoonmal is your mother and I tell you now that it was I who gave birth to you, would you believe me?"

"Truth is always the truth—whether anyone believes it or not will not affect it," there was anger in Jahandad's voice.

"But how will you be convinced of what is the truth?"

"Only when the story you tell is the same as the one that Zoonmal tells and the story that Zoonmal tells is the same as the one that you tell will I believe that that is the truth. But if you persist in saying one thing and Zoonmal another, how will I know what is true and what is not?"

Heemal wept and said, "But you have separated us, we don't know anything about each other! When you were a baby and we were brought before the King, even then the two of us had made the mistake of telling different stories. Won't you let me meet Zoonmal just once?"

"What kind of truth would it be that depended on mutual consultations?"

"What would a stupid, ignorant shepherdess know of truth and untruth? To me that alone is the truth which ensures that no thorn ever pricks your tender foot and no harm comes to you!"

"If you are really interested in my well being, you must tell me plainly whether I was born of you or Zoonmal."

"My beloved son, sorrows and anxieties have broken me. I don't know whether I am capable of telling the truth that you are searching for. Please ask Zoonmal, she is very wise. What she tells you will be the truth. Afterwards, tell me what she said and I will corroborate it and then at last the two of us will speak with one voice, not two, and your mind will finally be set at rest."

Jahandad was furious, "Now I know that as long as you two witches are alive I will never know the fact. To know the truth it is necessary that I put an end to one of you!"

The next day Heemal was tied to the tail of the fleetest horse in the royal stable. The horse was made to gallop away and run till Heemal's body was torn to bits and she was dead.

Once again Jahandad stood before Zoonmal and said, "Tell me the truth today. Who is my real mother, you or Heemal?"

"But I have already told you, my precious!"

"But that was not the truth!"

"How do you say that?"

"Heemal had never told me that she was my real mother. I just made it up to test how truthful you were, because you hadn't given me a straight answer. In fact she had said that my real mother was you, Zoonmal."

"May I die for you, my son! If what she said gives you pleasure, believe it to be the truth. All right then, I am your mother."

"Why did you lie in the first instance, then?", Jahandad raged.

"I had no idea of what Heemal would say. I was afraid, and so was Heemal, because that day when you were a babe in our arms we had made the blunder of speaking in two voices and as a result the King who sat on the throne of justice that day had ordered that you--may my tongue fall in pieces before I can even say it—should be brought under the teeth of a saw and cut into two."

"Tell me what the truth is—who gave birth to me, was it you or Heemal?"

"If you want to know the truth, my Prince, let me see Heemal just once."

"So that you can repeat what she says? Is that the truth you are talking about? Let me tell you one truth—you will never be able to see Zoonmal's face again!"

"Why, where is she? Is she all right?"

"I had that lying witch put to death!"

A cry escaped Heemal, "Heemal is dead? Why should I live then?" She beat her chest, tore her clothes to shreds, wept inconsolably, grieving and mourning for Heemal. Finally exhausted, she spoke through her tears, "After Sona the shepherd's death there was no one left but the two of us, she had me and I had her. We were everything to each other—confidante, consoler, healer of heartaches, sister, brother, mother, father and friend, who shared each other's sorrows and pains! Alas, the poor, innocent Heemal has been killed?" She turned to Jahandad and continued, "You wanted to know who your real mother was? It was this very Heemal from whose womb you were born, the same Heemal whom you have put to death. You are a murderer! You had your own mother killed, the one who gave you life! Go away, I cannot bear to look at you, you are a monster!"

"What did you say", Jahandad said in agony, "was Heemal, whom I put to death, my real mother? If what you say is the truth, then I will give myself the deserved punishment," saying this, he drew out his dagger and was about to plunge it into his chest when zoonmal wrenched his hand and said, "You drove one knife into me when you had Heemal killed, do you want to drive another into my heart when you kill yourself before my very eyes?"

Jahandad's hand froze and he said, "My death will drive a knife into your heart? Is that what you are saying? What does that mean?"

"It does not mean anything! Henceforth you will get no more answers from me," she turned her face away. Jahandad threw himself at her feet, wept and said, "Won't you have pity on me, Zoonmal? For once lift the veil of secrecy and tell me in clear words who gave birth to me,

you or Heemal? If you don't tell me now, this minute I die here, at your very feet!"

"Give me leave till tomorrow, and then I shall tell you the whole truth."

"Even though this night's wait will seem to stretch till eternity for me, be more painful than Doomsday itself, but I shall bear it all."

"But there is one condition—you must not come to me henceforth, I myself shall send word to you. The message you receive from me will be the truth, you must believe."

"But who will bring me your message?"

"Withdraw all the maids and nurses you have kept in my service, except one whom you trust completely. Leave her with me and she will bring you my message tomorrow morning."

Jahandad ordered the withdrawal of all servants from Zoonmal's chamber, except one elderly nursemaid. Late at night he went into his own bedroom.

Early the next morning, even before daybreak, there was a knock at his door. It was the first time that someone had dared to wake him up from sleep. He opened the door. It was the elderly nursemaid he had left in Zoonmal's chamber. Her hair dishevelled, she was in a state of shock. Beating her breast, she blurted out, "Master! Zoonmal is dead."

Jahandad's face fell. He felt suffocated and ran to the chamber. He saw the dagger which had fallen from his hand when Zoonmal wrenched it from his hand the previous day, plunged deep in her breast. She had done the deed apparently while the nursemaid was in sleep, and now Zoonmal lay cold in death.

After her last rites were performed and she was buried, Jaahandad called the nursemaid in the privacy of his room and asked her, "What was the message Zoonmal gave you for me before her death?"

"How can I bring it to my lips, Master? It will burn holes in my tongue and mouth! I dare not say it!"

"Tell me at once—everything she told you, word by word. Don't be afraid, even if its import should make the whole world go up in flames!"

"Zoonmal asked me to tell you that you were born of neither Heemal nor Zoonmal, but that you had burst out of a rock!"

The news spread through the length and breadth of the kingdom that the ruler was not a prince born of the Queen, but a shepherd's child from some far flung high pasture, and that he would give up the throne and leave in search of his origin and real identity. Through announcements, the people were asked to select a new ruler.

Jahandad took off the crown and royal robes, dressed himself in ochre robes and walked out of the palace. He wandered through meadows and plains, hills and mountains, forests and wildernesses, vallies and dales, rivers and waterfalls, lakes and springs, cities and villages, marketplaces and narrow lanes, searching, but could find no information anywhere. He questioned sadhus and sages, ascetics and dervishes, *pirs* and *faqirs*, the wisest philosophers, scholars and healers, the knowers and the ignorant, the commoners and the gifted ones—but no one could tell him who he was born of. No one could tell him of his origin. Finally he reached the place where the old King was meditating on God in a cave. He threw himself at his feet and said, "My Master and Father, you picked me up from the dust and placed me so high! You made me your son and raised me like a prince, with nothing to lack. Finally you placed the crown on my head and made me King. You are my master, my father, my king. But fate played a cruel trick on me and I realized that calling myself King was a mere illusion, that I was actually a shepherd boy, son of a poor shepherd, not a Prince."

The King looked at him with affection and said, "My dear son, my Prince, seeing you in this state makes knives turn in my heart—I do not regret that you have discovered the truth, glad that you have found things out yourself. Had it not been so, I might have told you myself. Though having renounced the crown and the world, I have bid goodbye to worldly relationships also I still think of you as my own flesh and blood, so nothing can ever affect my love for you, in fact you are dearer to me now. You continue to be my son and heir and the lawful King of this land."

"I have left the palace and all its luxuries, given up the crown and pushed away the throne because my mind was in turmoil and I had no peace. I could not discover who I was born of, or where my origin was and what my true identity is. You had so many wise, learned and resourceful ministers in your court, so many scholars and astrologers who could measure the path of the stars, and then you yourself were so sagacious, brightest among the bright. Didn't you ever think about it, or didn't anyone say anything which might give me a clue, an idea, a hint or warning of who I was born of, Zoonmal or Heemal?"

The King looked at Jahandad's face and two streams of tears began to flow down his cheeks.

Translated from Kashmiri by Neerja Mattoo

❑

Eating Out With the Kumars

Sunil Sharma

It was their idea of fun. I had just tagged along. There was no alternative for me. I had just dropped in. First they were awkwardly silent, then awkwardly 'overjoyed' and then awkwardly hesitant. "In fact, we were going out for dinner. If you had come five minutes later, you would have found the house locked," said Ramesh—in a voice that you regularly hear on a customer-care service number—a voice metallic and antiseptic, chilling and off-putting in its friendly remoteness.

"I am lucky."

"Yes."

"OK, you go ahead with your plan. I will stay on here in the house till you return." Of course, I was joking.

Ramesh smiled, "Come on, buddy. We cannot leave you as the resident watchman here."

"Hmm...you see I came unannounced. I do not want to disturb my best friend's evening out..."

He laughed. "That you have already done. Come on, yaar, do not waste our time. Join us, we are in a hurry." I knew I was a kind of intruder on their suburban moment of bliss.

I smiled, "OK, fine! Hope bhabhiji does not mind."

Bhabhiji said in a far off voice, "No problem," and gave an anaemic half-inch smile, a smile that hardly softened the contours of her long thin, and from what I could see, a stern whipped-up face. She has always been like that—aloof like the great Olympians. Her voice had always been joyless, a hint of strong Arctic ice in it. We called her an ice maiden. I could feel a subtle hostility in her flat, monotonous features and dull voice, resentment against this interruption.

As I said I had no alternatives than to tag along.

They came down in the elevator and went to the car park. All

around were the high-rises glinting in the early summer night. A pile of well-lit boxes of cement-n-glass. As distant as the standardised crowds surging in the busy choking streets. Typical of suburban Mumbai or any metro now, anywhere in the world!

Ramesh was taking an eternity to take out his car. Maybe, they were discussing, arguing about me. I felt like a municipality garbage bin. I felt like fleeing from the scene, much like a criminal. I started moving towards the exit of the building as quietly as a cat, blending with the background as much as possible. I successfully made my exit and hit the street, moving casually, neither too fast nor too slow. A few minutes later, a car screeched behind me and the voice, husky and irritated, hollered, "Hey, what is the idea?"

So finally I was caught again!

"Hmm," Ramesh grunted. "You were acting as if your bum was on fire!" and, laughed aloud. His anorexic wife showed no signs of being alive. She just stared ahead at the rushing road.

"You see, I felt guilty..."

"Guilty! Yes. Hundred percent guilty! First you come popping up like Casper at wrong places and wrong times and then you do this disappearing act like Mandrake."

"Well, well...I tried your landline. Tried your cell a couple of times." I said, a bit hurt, off colour.

"We came half-an-hour before. Thought we should eat out. Both of us got tired. Cooking is hell."

"Life is hell," said the wife in her flat tone, features expressionless, like a Madam Tussad statue.

"Two is party. Three is a crowd," I said and laughed dryly. Both ignored my wisdom and skeletal laugh.

Ramesh dodged the commuters, strays, and speeding buses and hit the highway.

"Where to, honey?"

"Oh, our favourite joint," she said in the stiff voice of a morgue attendant.

"The one at Juhu?"

"Yeah!"

"OK!"

He speeded up and raced down the highway much like Formula-1 driver Schumacher. He switched on the car stereo and put on some heavy metal that violently assaulted my auditory senses. Sitting in the backseat of the Lancer, I felt like an idiot, clutching my meager jhola with its bare content, a tabloid and the case of my bi-focals.

"And who is this Caspar?" I asked, timidly, anxious for any icebreaker,

a means of establishing my presence in the confines of this luxury contraption.

"Hey, you do not watch TV?"

"No, not much."

"Then how do you survive Mumbai evenings at home? TV is the life line of the nuclear families here," Ramesh said.

"I dunno. I hate the weepy stuff. All saas-bahu stuff. Those huge sets we do not find in a Malad 2 BHK set up," I said lamely.

"Oh! TV is not intellectual. Who bothers things intellectual, or real?"

"Life is not intellectual," thin wife volunteered.

"Yeah. Life is eating lot of hot stuff." He said, increasing the volume. Heavy metal hit me like a stunning blow of a hammer. Conversation was like a dead telephone line that never gets repaired fast here.

The Hut was almost on the edge of the glittering Arabian Sea. They had recreated the magic of a Goan village. Lots of swaying palms, with stringed lights. Thatched roofs. Chairs beneath. The sea breeze, damp and smelly, rode in on the wings of the night. Part of the package! Ramesh ordered Bacardi with lime, seafood.

"What else, honey?"

"Thai paneer. Veg Manchurian and butter naans. Lots of green salad," she said, becoming alive at the cooking smells.

He obeyed. I never existed for them.

Two quick Bacardies and they revived.

"Enjoy. It is lovely night."

"Yes, I am enjoying. Food is better here," she said, looking past me, in the general direction.

"Yeah. Food is excellent here and so is money," he said.

"We get the value for money," she said, still looking in the direction of general humanity out there.

Of course, no humanity existed there except the diners, in various stages of drunkenness.

"So, what brings you here, buddy?"

"Well...I had this sudden urge to meet you, to have a dialogue, to talk to you...More than two years have passed since we last met, I just wanted to talk to you," I said.

"Good you dropped in. How is life?"

"Oh, so-so. Life for a salesperson is not as exciting as it is for a broker and a tax consultant."

He laughed. "You are always complaining. You meet people, dead lines, and targets. Delivering goods. It is really wonderful."

I said nothing.

"Nice you came. For old times' sake, let us *enjoy*. This is the best rum ordered for you," he said. Just then, his mobile rang. He talked business for ten minutes.

I felt like part of the bamboo furniture. The sea hissed in the background—much like my hosts' pent up anger at the Casper sitting with them. Wife sipped the bacardi and ate Caesar's salad or whatever it is called.

"Hey, nibble something. Munchies add to the pleasure of eating," he commanded.

"Sure. You have a good cell phone," I said.

He laughed. A dry, staccato laugh of a smoker or an asthmatic. "A camera phone. She is just gorgeous." He is putting on his richie-rich show. He stroked the phone tenderly as if stretching the body of a naked woman.

"Honey, anything else?"

"Not at the moment," she said in a slightly tipsy voice. "It is worth dying for..."

"What?"

"Food here," she said.

"Oh, food, good food, music turns her on," he said and winked at me.

"Yeah. As the good cars, cell phones, watches turn you on," she said, laughing metallically, features dead.

"Yes. They are the guy things. Objects of great desire. Males are hung upon them."

"He cares more for his Lancer," she said, voice neutral, to the world in general.

"Yeah. The way you care for new clothes, jewellery and bags," he said, playfully and teasing.

"Do not start that again," she warned.

"I was joking."

"Your jokes are getting stale and awful. Silly."

He blanched. I felt uneasy. Luckily for him, he got another call on his cell. Woman munched and sipped—rigid and fixed in her body language. The diners around smoked, drank and ate. A man sang a Pankaj Udhas number from an elevated platform. Two men accompanied this resident crooner who sang to an indifferent audience.

Then the food arrived. Ramesh finished off his business conversation and looked at the sumptuous spread and said, "Wow!", while wife attacked the food hungrily. I had asked the waiter not to serve me. I was happy with my share of salad.

"It is just delicious!" she said.

"Yeah." He said, mouthful. "You, not eating?"

"No, I do not feel like eating."

"This is the best stuff, best hotel in the town. Folks splurge here."

"Not many can afford this kind of set up," wife said.

"Mumbai has the best upscale joints. 'Course, off limits to crowds. Exclusive. We often dine here. A dinner for a couple costs upwards of Rs. 7,000/-. Costly, very costly!"

The tone was chilling. At least, to me.

The crowds could never afford all this. The crowds travelled in subhuman locals, sweated out in homes and offices, got fired and hired in this Mumbai. They ate a wada pav from the corner shop or pav bhaji or Chinese fried rice, occasionally bought a Sidney Sheldon from the Fort pavements, read the evening papers and plopped down on bed and slept like a dog...to start all over again next morning.

Not their idea of Mumbai.

I felt stifled. I had strayed into an enemy zone.

"Excuse me," I said and stood up, clutching my meager cloth bag.

They did not look up.

"I am going to bathroom," I said.

"With your jhola," said Ramesh, smile a tad crooked.

"An old habit," I said, grimly.

"We won't rob you," he said, gulping food in quick succession. I did not say. I knew he knew I was leaving. He did not show any emotion on his fat leathery face. Just continued attacking the Rs 7000/ food served before them, the kind you get at Rs 100 at the roadside dhabba. I started moving—eager to make my escape. I reached the exit and looked back. Ramesh looked at me precisely at that moment and then hurriedly dropped his gaze.

In fact, he did not care. I, too, did not care. How long this pretense?

I came out of that fucking hotel. Walked down to the bus stop, breathing outside fresh air lustily like a sprinter hungry for the Oxygen. I stood there at the bus stop, waiting for a crowded bus that will take me to my home, sweet but little home, where I will be a monarch for the night, before starting my Sisyphean journey again next morning. The air, the regular smells and sounds of the city revived me and then I felt happy—to see the lurching bus coming over to me like an old buddy.

❑

The Birth Pangs of a Poet: The Early Works of Soso Tham, Chief Bard of the Khasis

Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih

Soso Tham (1873-1940) is the uncrowned, though acknowledged poet laureate of the Khasis and his death anniversary falling on December 18 has always been commemorated as a state holiday since the late 1970s. According to his most authoritative biographer, Hughlet Warjri, Tham was born in Sohra, or Cherrapunjee, in 1873 (actual date unknown) into "a poor but happy family," newly converted to Christianity. He was the third and only son in a family of four children. His mother, Lyngkien Tham, was said to be a very pious woman and married one Hat Tongper from Sohkha, a village near Dawki, who had come to Sohra to work with the Welsh missionaries. Though poor, the young Tham was fortunate in other respects, for he grew up in a cheerful, God-fearing family, in a place which had not only become world-famous because of its record-shattering rainfall and the breath-taking beauty of its landscape, but also because it had been the first headquarters of the British empire in the Khasi Hills, where the new religion and school education had first taken root. Warjri says in his book, *U Soso Tham bad ki Jingtrei Jong U* (1980) that Tham was among the few who were able to take advantage of this education and that he studied in one of the missionary schools there till Class VI, although his father had died sometime before that. A little after this first tragedy, the family shifted to Shillong, which had replaced Sohra as the new capital in 1874, and Tham was reported to have continued with his studies in the new township. But the early death of his father, it seems, proved too much for his family, and this consorted with grinding poverty to force him out of school when he was only in Class VIII.

Warjri also records that at that time there was an attempt to induct Tham as a student in the newly-established Theological College at Sohra, but that somehow did not work out and so he began his career as an itinerant teacher in village primary schools and finally landing up on October 12, 1905 as a teacher of Khasi in Shillong Government High School, Mawkhar (the only high school in the Hills in those days). Tham remained in the school till he retired on July 30, 1931.

Soso Tham's total output as a writer is rather small. He has two volumes of poetry to his credit: *Ka Duitara Ksiar* (The Golden Harp, 1925), comprising 46 short poems, including lyrics, ballads and nursery rhymes, and 14 translations of various English poets; and his "crowning work,"[1] *Ki Sngi Ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep* (The Olden Days of *U Hynñiew Trep* (1936), [2] which is a single long poem having 181 stanzas of six lines divided into 10 sections, each under a separate heading. The poem is about the *Hynñiew Trep* people, ancestors of the seven Khasi sub-tribes comprising, the Khynriams in East Khasi Hills, the Pnars in Jaiñtia Hills, the Bhois in Ri Bhoi District, the Wars in the foothills bordering Bangladesh, the Marams, Lyngngams, and the now-little-heard-of Diko in West Khasi Hills. Tham had also translated *Aesop's Fables*, Charles Dickens's *The Life of Our Lord* and the great Shakespearean comedy, *The Tempest*; to which he had given the title of *U Kyllang*. Unfortunately the manuscript of this translation was irrecoverably lost because of "the reckless negligence"[3] of his heirs.

All this then, along with some translations and original compositions of religious songs, constitutes the entire volume of his work as a writer. There are very important biographical details to account for this lack of prolificacy, but then again, it is this very fact which has become the surprise of surprises, where his fame and popularity as a poet is concerned. How could a poet whose output is so meagre, who had started writing so late in life and who had confessed in the preface to *Ki Sngi ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep* that "he had never known about Art or Poetry: foot, metre, rhyme, rhythm, idea" and that all these had seemed to him "like a confused litter of cattle bones in the hills" rise to become a national[4] poet and stand towering over Khasi literature like someone who "doth bestride the narrow world like a Colossus," to borrow Cassius's description of Caesar.

Some of his poems were set to music and became immediate hits. His inspiring words were heard everywhere: in casual chats, in public meetings, in funeral gatherings and wherever people had anything to say about the burning issues of the day and the future of their land. Such was his powerful appeal that he was quoted by the learned and unlearned

alike; by the old and the young, as if his poetry was like the vast expanse of the horizon, accommodating the motley crowd within it.

Although all this glory had come only 33 years after his death, there were those among his eminent contemporaries who had immediately spotted his genius and heaped praises upon him. S. K. Bhuyan,[5] called him the "Robert Burns of the Khasi Highlands" in his book, *Studies in the Literature of Assam* (1956), which also contains a chapter on "Modern Khasi Literature." Rev. Oliver Thomas, the then General Secretary of the Foreign Mission of the Presbyterian Church of Wales, described him as "a man of great gifts" and continued, "had it been possible for him, as a young man, to have had the advantages of an academic training, he surely would have risen to great heights as a scholar."[6] Contemporary writer like Homiwell Lyngdoh and R. R. Thomas were simply captivated by the sheer magic of his poetry. Homiwell Lyngdoh was inspired to write an essay on the origins of the Hynñiew Trep people after reading Tham's long poem, *Ki Sngi ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep* and Thomas called this poem "one of the best if not the very best in Khasi Literature. It is decidedly the best in verse that a Khasi has produced and is undoubtedly a classic."[7]

To the later writers and critics, Soso Tham was not only a poet but also a visionary, a philosopher and a moral teacher. H. W. Sten compared his crowning work with Milton's *Paradise Lost* in his book *Na ka Hyndai sha ka Lawei* (1980) and writing earlier, R. S. Lyngdoh had even gone further as to say in the "Soso Tham Birth Centenary Souvenir 1973" that "If Rabindranath Tagore could achieve world recognition through his English version of his *Gitanjali* U Soso Tham can as well achieve such fame if only his masterpiece [*Ki Sngi Ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep*] could be translated into other languages." (P 71) Lyngdoh's dream may or may not be realised, but all this high praise decidedly prove one thing—that Soso Tham is a poet worthy of study and research. Such a study is all the more exigent because to the outside world, to the non-Khasi readers, he was but a name, a reputation, whose aura shines but whose poetry still lurks in the dark confines of Khasi Literature.

It is something very strange that the works of so popular a poet among his own people have never been translated and the few that have been are so bad that they have not only not found a place in any recognised journal of poetry in the country, but they also threaten to be a disservice to the memory of this poet who had once written about himself and the apathy of most of his contemporary readers in the following lines:

Jar-jar bapoh ki dieng ba khlaw,
U san bapdeng ki ñiut;
U syntiew pher, u tiew-dohmaw,-
Laiphew-na-ar jingmut.

Jar-Jar barud ki wah ba tngen,
Ban iwbih ynda stai;
U tiew tyrkhang ba ai jingkmen,
U jyrngam khadar bnai.

Iathuh, premmiet ba ieit ki blei,
Bad phi ki lyoh bun rong;
Iathuh ia nga u don baei
U khlur ba paw nyngkong.

Jar-Jar u im, jar-jar u jah,
Hapoh rai-eh rai-dam;
Jar-Jar ha jingtep ai un thiah,-
Hapoh u phlang jyrngam. (P 12)
("U Phlang Jyrngam," *Ka Duitara Ksiar*)

Below is the English version:

Quietly in the wood,
It grows among the weeds;
An uncommon blossom, *u tiew dohmaw,**
A thing of lofty thoughts.

Quietly by shadowy streams,
To be a fragrance when faded,
The joy-giving fern
Remains green for twelve moons.

Tell me twilight, beloved of the gods,
And you the motley clouds;
Tell me where is that star
That first speckles the sky.

Quietly he lives, quietly he dies,
Amidst the wilderness;
Quietly in the grave let him rest,
Beneath the green, green grass.

("The Green Grass")

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* A wild flower, symbol of great wisdom.

If we place this poem side by side with that of Yi Kyu-Bo, a world-famous Korean poet, we will understand how Soso Tham has been able to transcend the immediate boundaries of his life, his time and his culture to appeal to the universal feelings of mankind itself. The poem of Yi Kyu-Bo reads:[8]

I have always feared withering sooner than grass
and trees,
But I find the volumes of my poor poems worse
than nothing.

Who will know a thousand years from now,
That a man named Yi was born in a corner of
Korea?

("To My Son Editing My Poem")

It is this transcendence, this affinity between Tham and other poets of the world that has been the inspiring force behind this assessment. It might well be a surprise if the readers of Tham's poetry come to know, that writing in 1936, Tham had already pre-empted J. F. Kennedy in his famous call to his countrymen, "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country."[9] Writing 24 years earlier, Tham had made the same call in his famous lyric *"Ki Sngi U Hynñiew Trep"*[10] when he said, *"Ngi im ba kiwei pat ki sngi, / Aiu ngin leh namar ka ri?"* ("We live in other days than our own / what shall we do for our land?"). One therefore feels that it is time to draw more attention to Tham, to exhume his works as it were, from the crypt of Khasi literature and exhibit them to the world so that they may be read and appreciated by all.

It was Tham's *hiraeth*,[11] his love and forlorn longing for his language and literature that had made him turn to writing and poetry. According to Warjri, it was Tham's entrance into the Shillong Government High School as a teacher that had brought him face to face with the stark realities of Khasi literature in those days. The predicament Khasi literature was in then profoundly disturbed him and he committed himself to shoulder the responsibility of developing it. A brief summary[12] of its history till Tham's teaching commission in the school will afford more insight into the situation.

The Khasis, who had a rich oral literature consisting of myths, folk stories, fairy tales, fables, narrative poetry, gnomic *phawar* (verse) and lively traditional songs,[13] had never obtained the blessing of the written word until the mid-nineteenth century, that is, until the appearance of the Welsh Presbyterian Missionary, Thomas Jones, on July 22, 1841. Prior

to this, around 1831, there were indeed attempts by Krishna Chandra Pal and Alexander B. Lish of the American Baptist Mission of Serampore, to reduce Khasi to the complex Bengali script. But these had proved unsuccessful and it was left to Jones to take up where they had left off. The tenacious and inventive Welshman resorted to Welsh orthography and the Roman script to cast the language in written form. The outcome was the publication, in early 1842, of the *First Khasi Reader* or *Cacitab Ban Hicai Ca Citien Cassia*. It is out of this little book that all other Khasi books have emerged.

Since that time till the year 1895, the writing and publication of Khasi books rested solely in the hands of the Presbyterian missionaries and therefore, the literature of this period of 40 years or so was "almost exclusively Christian and moralistic in character."[14] Jones himself translated the Welsh *Rhodd Mam* (A Mother's Gift, 1842), the *Gospel of Mathew* (1846), a book of scriptural catechism and a collection of hymns for use in the mission's first three schools in Sohra. From the pens of his successors came translations of *Rhodd Tad* (A Father's Gift), Watt's *Scripture History* (1859), Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1864), Longfellow's "The Psalm of Life" and the complete translation of the Bible (1891).

The only books written during the period that had little or nothing to do with religion was William Pryse's *Khasi Grammar* (1859) and Hugh Robert's *Anglo-Khasi Dictionary* (1870) and *Khasi Grammar*. John Roberts,[15] who had earlier translated *Pilgrim's Progress*, the "Psalm of Life" and the *Bible*, added the less religious-centred *Khasi First Reader*, *Khasi Second Reader*, *Khasi Third Reader* and *Khasi Fourth Reader* to the treasury of Khasi literature.

Others followed in the footsteps of these later writers and came out with their own books. Among the first non-missionary writers to take up the task of further developing Khasi literature, was another non-Khasi, S. M. Amjad Ali. In 1888 he brought out the first ever book of self-composed Khasi poems, *Ka Myntoi Lane ka Kot Boit*, and thus earned for himself the distinction of becoming the father of Khasi poetry. After Ali, the precursor who called on the Khasi people to stand up and chart their own course of history, came what has been described by R. S. Lyngdoh[16] as "the great cultural revival at the turn of the century, ushering for the first time, a coherent and purposeful challenge to the influence of Christianity and the missionaries' monopoly over intellectual and cultural affairs." This awakening was led by three erudite Khasi scholars, Rabon Singh Kharsuka, Jeebon Roy Mairom and Radhon Singh Berry Kharwanlang. Rabon Singh[17] is reputed to be the first Khasi to ever write a book. Among his well-known works are *Ka Kitab Niam Kheiñ Ki Khasi*, a book about *Niam Trai* or Khasi indigenous faith, published between

1897 and 1900, followed by *Ka Kitab Jingphawar* (1905), a collection of traditional gnomic verses and *Ka Kot Jingiathuh Khana Puriskam* (1908), a collection of folk stories and fairy tales. Jeebon Roy produced altogether 11 books including *Ka Kitab Shaphang Uwei U Blei*, a tract about one God, and the history of India in Khasi. Radhon Singh Berry came up with the still-popular *Ki Jingsneng Tymmen*, a collection of Khasi aphorisms. Others like Sib Charan Roy Dkhar, Morkha Joseph Chyne and Hormurai Diengdoh contributed with their works to broaden the circle of secular Khasi literature.

But because the schools were run by the missionaries, the outstanding efforts of Ali and the Khasi pioneers went largely unnoticed. According to the historians of Khasi literature,[18] when Tham joined the Shillong Government High School in 1905 as a teacher in Khasi, he discovered that it was mostly religious texts like *Ka Kitab U Joshwa* (The Book of Joshua), *Ka Kitab U Job* (The Book of Job), *Ka Kitab Ki Proverb* (The Book of Proverbs), and others that had been prescribed for the Entrance or Matriculation Examination. The only exceptions to these were John Robert's *Khasi Fourth Reader* and *Ka Kot Jingiathuh Khana Puriskam* of Rabon Singh.

This state of affairs continued till 1919. During that time, as may be gathered, Khasi literature was still at a very incipient stage, and as most of the books written by non-missionary authors were not on the school curriculum all literary activities came to a sudden halt, leading to a sudden slump in the production of new texts. This meant that Tham and other teachers had to teach the same things repeatedly for about 14 years from 1905. For Tham, the bibliophile and conscientious educator, there could be nothing worse than this. In the preface to *Ki Sngi ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep* he confessed that he was quite fed up with having to "teach the same books over and over again for years." (P x) He added that even the students "were bored to death with having to read the same stuff from class VII to class X." (P xi)

In his book, Warjri[19] confirms that Tham, who had tasted the sweet kernel of Khasi texts and who had realised the vast potential of the Khasi written word, could not accept this somniferous situation. At this point of time he was not aware that he would himself be called upon to shoulder the responsibility of promoting Khasi literature. He did not know that he had the talent or moral strength to do it. Indeed he did not know that he held the "Gilded Pen"[20] in his own hand and that one day he would be using it in the most effective manner. His natural reaction, therefore, was to turn to his contemporary authors, to plead with them to write and bring out new books that could be incorporated

in the syllabus. He had appealed to them many times but had received not so much as a hint that they had heard him: "...deaf were the ears of the wise (missionaries and Khasis)..." (P x) he wrote of their unresponsiveness in the preface. So what was he to do? He was at his wit's end. If the learned would not do it, who else would, or could? Was the seed of Khasi writings, sown by Thomas Jones and nurtured into a healthy sapling during the period of the cultural revival, to be stunted now by the combined inertia of his contemporaries? These were forlorn questions that furied him night and day and made his life miserable. He had been moved by the great moral teachings of Christianity in the translations of the missionaries. He had delighted in the splendour of traditional wisdom in the books of the Khasi scholars: was he to lose forever what he had once possessed? Was he not to see his own literature grow to the full height of its early promise?

In the grip of this awful *hiraeth*, he wrestled alone with his "longing like despair"[21] until one day when strolling along the cliffs of Sunapani (Waterfall in the suburban west of Shillong), he heard this persistent whisper: "Do it yourself."[22] But even this inspiration only brought him more misery and restlessness. How was he to go about it? When he thought of writing and poetry, he only saw a thick black cloud masking the path ahead, for after all, had he not confessed that "he had never known about Art or Poetry: foot, metre, rhyme, idea...?" It was only after losing sleep over the matter for weeks that he finally came to a decision.

One morning, Warjri relates, he marched into a classroom and proposed to his Class X students: "Young men, let us try our luck in writing our own books!"[23] The class broke into a deafening roar as the students laughed at what they had thought was the best joke, of the morning. But their teacher was never more serious than at that moment. He called to one of the students to bring him the anthology of English poetry[24] they had been doing for so many years and told the whole class to translate (it is not clear, by chance or design) W.E. Hickson's nursery rhyme, "Drive the Nail Aright." The students thought their beloved Babu, for so they called him, had lost his mind. It was unthinkable for them to embark upon such a task. Warjri quotes Tham himself as saying, "Some looked at the poem and scratched their heads; others tittered like a *shakyllia* [a type of bird], and still others sat with folded hands and drooping eyelids as if they were hearth stones." (P 54)

Meanwhile, Warjri goes on, Tham on his part sat in his chair with pen and paper in hand, lost in thought and straining hard to come up with a Khasi translation of the first line, "Drive the nail aright, boys." He remained in this posture of intense reflection for a space of ten

minutes after which he triumphantly cried, Archimedes-like, "I have found...I have found the fibre." (P 54) And there was another deafening roar as the class cheered its teacher's success. The fibre was "*Sah beit ia u prek, bep,*" from which Tham started working on the poem, as one would do when breaking a particularly knotty block of wood.

Having experienced the thrill of his first triumph, and now fully realising that he did have it in him the talent to write and create, his *biraeth* grew in force and like Shelly's "West Wind," drove him forward as if to a predestined destiny. The end result was hugely satisfying. As Tham wrote in the preface, from this "mustard seed," that is "*Sah beit ia u prek, bep,*" grew others, till gradually they evolved into "the branches and leaves" (P xiii) of *Ki Sngi ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep*, his piece de resistance.

But Tham did not have an easy going of it. His onward course as a poet was slow and painful. Having sown his "mustard seed," he wanted, as he said in the preface, to "pursue onwards as if for a prize." (P xi) The prize that he sought was a fuller understanding of poetry and its intimidating paraphernalia, which had at first seemed to him "like a confused litter of cattle bones in the hills." This, he felt, was the only means through which he could fulfil his heart-burning desire to contribute, through poetry, to his literature and thus push it along the difficult path of progress. But he was impeded in his high objective by three things which Warjri lists as, "... His lack of education; his lack of travel; and his lack of assistance from Khasi literature." (P 57)

Since nothing much was happening in Khasi literature, especially in the field of poetry, Warjri reports that Tham had to take recourse to English poetry. But because of his rudimentary education, seeking enlightenment from the English world of letters must have been a very formidable task indeed. Warjri suspects that Tham must have struggled "like a farm bull to plod his way through English literature." (P 61) And struggled he did, for the *biraeth* in his heart was a hunger, inappeasable, a fire, unrelenting. With a zest that would have done the most industrious schoolboy proud, he dug into the works of Shakespeare, Milton, the Romantic poets and any other he could lay his hands on, in his quest to discover what is prosody and the metrical laws of English poetry. Eventually, after three years of this gruelling ground-breaking, Tham was said to have felt confident enough to complete the translation of "Drive the Nail Aright" in 1922.

The extraordinary time taken by Tham to translate this little poem can be explained further by the manner of his translation. He had not only translated the words but had followed its metrical pattern to the

letter. A comparison between the original and the translated version will bring out the similarities, at the level of form, more vividly:

Drive the nail aright, boys,
Hit it on the head;
Strike with all your might, boys,
While the iron's red.

When you've work to do, boys,
Do it with a will;
They who reach the top, boys,
First must climb the hill.

Standing at the foot, boys,
Looking at the sky;
How can you get up, boys,
If you never try?

Though you stumble oft, boys,
Never be downcast:
Try and try again, boys,
You will win at last.

Drive the nail aright, boys,
Hit it on the head;
Strike with all your might, boys,
While the iron's red.
("Drive the Nail Aright")

The Khasi translation:

Sah beit ia u prek, hep,
Ai na shata dar;
Tangon eh taiñ-taiñ, hep,
Myndang saw u nar.

Man ba trei jingtrei, hep,
Naduh mynsiem trei;
Ki ban poi sha kliar, hep,
Ban kiew lum ki dei.
Phai ka khmat shaneng, hep,
Sdang naduh ba sdang;
Kumno phin poi kliar, hep,
La phim da pyrshang?

La jynthut bunsien, hep,
Wat ju tieng ne kyinh:

Pyrshang iai pyrshang, hep,
Phin jop hi khaddub.

Sah beit ia u prek, hep,
Ai na shata dar;
Tangon eh taiñ-taiñ, hep,
Myndang saw u nar.

("Sah Beit ia u Prek")

Both versions are written in four-line stanzas with the first and third lines of each stanza containing six syllables, while the second and fourth containing five. In both, the first stanza is repeated as a refrain at the end, while the rhyme scheme also follows a similar pattern of *abab*, *acac*, *adad*, *aeae*, and *abab*. All these points of comparison call attention to the fact that Tham had clearly succeeded in the task he had set out for himself, that is, to achieve an absolute understanding of English prosody. This is also borne out by later translations and original compositions arranged in the popular metrical designs of the day.

With the successful completion of this poem, Tham threw himself into his translation work with more vigour and translated a total of 10 English poems into Khasi. These include, among others, William Shakespeare's "The Passionate Pilgrim;" William Wordsworth's "Lucy Poems" and "The Solitary Reaper;" Lord George Gordon Byron's "The Destruction of Sennacherib;" Sir Walter Scott's "Patriotism;" and William Cowper's "The Diverting History of John Gilpin." These translations, in turn facilitated the composition of his own poems, which started as nursery rhymes and then matured to a more serious type of poetry as the poet gained in skill and aplomb. These were later collected together with the translations in *Ki Poetry Khasi*, afterwards to receive wide recognition and plaudit as *Ka Duitara Ksiar*.

It must be reiterated once again, however, that the emergence of Tham's first collection of poetry in 1925 was not at all a smooth nine-month gestation. Later, Tham wrote in a number of his poems about these difficult beginnings: the loneliness, the exacting toils, the hardships, and the pain that he had to endure during his long and arduous search for the essence of poetry. Compounding the problems directly linked with poetry writing, were a host of others, which nearly made the publication of this book impossible. Warjri recounts that the poverty that had forced him out of school in childhood still haunted him in manhood. He was but a poorly paid schoolteacher and a widower with the responsibility of raising four sons and the children of his only daughter, who died prematurely in 1926. As if poverty was not obstacle enough

to discourage a man from the costly business of publishing books, there was, in those days, no financial support from the government for authors who wished to print their own books. Tokin Rymbai,[25] confirmed this when he wrote in the *Dr. Homiwell Lyngdoh Birth Centenary Souvenir* (1997):

> During the days of Babu Soso Tham, to write Khasi texts and have them printed was a very expensive affair. There was no grant from the Government to support and encourage authors as is the practice today... (P 77)

But the worst vexation for Tham and the writers of his day was perhaps the lack of readership. Readers form the backbone of literature. They are the sponsors who inspire writers to ever-greater feats. It is for this reason that the most developed literatures of the world are invariably those that command the interest and goodwill of the greatest number of people. But unfortunately for Tham, this was not the case with Khasi literature. Writing an introduction to Tham's *Ki Sngi ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep*, S. K. Bhuyan said:

> U Soso Tham has been born an age too early. His countrymen have not as yet been trained to appreciate the inner beauty of his poetry, nay of any poetry. In such an atmosphere even the most poetically-minded genius will languish for want of inspiration and stimulus for self-expression. (P vii)

It is because of this that Reverend Oliver Thomas[26] said in 1920: "It is not easy to publish books in this land. Most of those who had published earlier had lost quite a bit of money and, therefore, people are hesitant to write books." Even Tham had commented on this hopeless situation in his "*Ka Tien Khmat*" (preface) to *Ka Duitara Ksiar*:

> *Hynrei u Khasi mynta um treh pule lymda phñian ba u ba skul bad ba ïngmane. Bad ki khynnah kim pule ia ka kot Khasi, la ka bha katno katno, lymda ka ka dei ka Text Book. Don jingmatlah kaba kham thlip nalor kane? (P ii)*
>
> (But the Khasi today refuses to read unless compelled to do so at school or the church. And the young people do not read a Khasi book, however good it may be, unless it is a Text Book. Is there a blindness more opaque than this?)

Warjri even tells us that Tham had to go from house to house like a peddler to try selling his first published work, *Ki Phawar U Aesop* (Aesop's Fables, 1920), which has become the most widely read book in Khasi society today. If Tham had to assume the role of a door-to-door salesman to hawk his first book, what is it that had made him battle against all odds in order to complete writing and publish his second in 1925? His second is, of course, his first collection of poetry, *Ki Poetry Khasi* or *Ka Duitara Ksiar*. Poetry as a norm attracts even fewer takers than stories and fables. Yet in the face of all these harrowing afflictions, Tham had not only completed this first volume of poems but had gone on from there to the even more rigorous employment of writing his most significant work, *Ki Sngi ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep*. What is it that had impelled him to compose this poem of 181 six-line stanzas?

These queries have been partly answered earlier when *hiraeth* for his native tongue and literature has been ascribed as the poet's prime mover. But to face down all these traumatic experiences; to "depart from the familiar world" as he himself had written in the preface, and drudge on "in good health or in sickness—amidst the ups and downs of life, amidst scorn and praises;" (P xi-xii) the poet must have been motivated by a much greater compulsion than *hiraeth* for his language and literature.

Of himself and his poetry, the great Chilean poet, Pablo Neruda, had said:

> Under the volcanoes, besides the snow-capped mountains, among the huge lakes, the fragrant, the silent, the tangled Chilean forest...I have come out of that landscape, that mud, that silence, to roam, to go singing through the world...[27]

In a way, Neruda's confession can be used to discover the secret repertoire of Tham's strength as a poet. Like Neruda's poetry, it is out of an immense love for his land, his people,[28] and all that they imply, that Tham's poetry had risen like a nourishing plant from a literary field that was degenerating into a dry and fallow patch. This was the implacable compulsion, which had driven Tham to the calling of a poverty-stricken poet and eventually, in his people's estimation, to greatness.

In his book, Warjri also speaks of the "pure and profound patriotism" of the poet. He notes, "The words of wisdom which are more often accommodated in his [Tham's] writings are those that refer to his land." (P 71) In fact, Warjri insists that it was the poet's patriotic fervour that had spawned many of the poems in *Ka Duitara Ksiar* and that had been the seed from which had sprung the colossal tree of Khasi poetry, *Ki Sngi ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep*. One who has gone through the

works of Soso Tham will not hesitate to agree with Warjri, that it was indeed patriotism, the mother of all *biraeths* that had been at the heart of his most powerful creative impulse. It is an emotion that reveals itself almost everywhere in his poems, in all its infinite varieties. It becomes not only the subject matter of his poetry, but truly its inspiring and sustaining power. It is this parent *biraeth* that had gifted him the courage to embark on what must have seemed like a mad pursuit to his countrymen, and Don Quixote-like, "to dream the impossible dream, to fight the unbeatable foe, to bear with unbearable sorrow…."[29]

End Notes

1 R. S. Lyngdoh, "A Review on *Ki Sngi Ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep*," Soso Tham Birth Centenary Celebrations Souvenir 1873-1973, ed. B. Chedrack Jyrwa (Shillong: Souvenir Committee, 1973) 71.

2 '*Hynñiew Trep*' literally means 'Seven Huts,' but this is a proper name referring to the ancestors of the seven Khasi sub-tribes as explained in the lines that follow. The writer therefore chooses to retain the name as it is.

3 Hughlet Warjri, *U Soso Tham bad ki Jingtrei Jong U* (Shillong: Hughlet Warjri, 1980) 5.

4 This term should be taken in the Khasi context since the Khasi and Jaintia Hills were under British rule and had not become a part of India till the signing of the Instrument of Accession by the different Khasi-Jaintia states in 1948. See I. Nongbri, *Ka Histori Ka Ri Hynniewtrep* (Shillong: I. Nongbri, 1982) 51.

5 A well-known Assamese writer, S. K. Bhuyan was the Vice-Chancellor of Gauhati University during Tham's time. For more of his comments on Tham see "Modern Khasi Literature," Studies in the Literature of Assam (Gauhati: S. K. Bhuyan, 1956) N. pag.

6 The quotation is from a letter by Reverend Oliver Thomas, General Secretary of The Foreign Mission of the Presbyterian Church of Wales, Liverpool (n. d.). See Minnette Sibon Tham, *I Mabah Soso Tham* (Shillong: Minnette Sibon Tham, 1990) Appendix iv.

7 The quotation is from R. R. Thomas's, "Opinion" printed as a foreword to *Ki Sngi ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep*, by Soso Tham. xviii. Prof. Thomas (1888-1959) was the younger brother of the distinguished statesman and first Khasi Member of Parliament, Reverend J. J. M. Nichols Roy. After a brilliant career as an academician, beginning with his lectureship in Philosophy at Scottish Church's College, Calcutta (1914-16), he became the first and only Khasi Principal of Cotton College, Gauhati (1944-46). See Charles Thomas, "Roy Rowland Thomas, Eminent Educationist, Scholar and Teacher," Shillong Centenary Celebration (Shillong: Celebration Committee, 1976) 69-72.

8 The poem quoted appeared in the Penguin Book of Korean Poetry, Sam Kim-Jung, ed. and trans., (London: Penguin, 1986) 56.

9 Inaugural address of J. F. Kennedy as President of the USA, 20 January 1961; J. M. and M. J. Cohen, The Penguin Dictionary of Modern Quotations (London: Penguin Books, 1980) 181.

10 This poem appearing in *Ka Duitara Ksiar*, P 54-6 should not be mistaken with the book, *Ki Sngi ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep.*

11 Welsh word loosely translated as longing for something once possessed. It is marked by a love-lost-longing or praise-lament-yearning syndrome in literature.

12 See 3 above. 54.

13 The summary is based on the following:
   i. R. S. Lyngdoh, *Ka Histori ka Thoh ka Tar: Bynta II* (Shillong: R. S. Lyngdoh, 1983) 131-7.
   ii. Hamlet Bareh, A Short History of Khasi Literature (Shillong: Hamlet Bareh, 1969) 49-72.
   iii. H. W. Sten, Khasi Poetry: Origin & Development (New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1990) 93-221.
   iv. Kitbor W. Nongrum, *Ki Nongthohkot Khasi: Bynta I & II* (Shillong: Kitbor W. Nongrum, 1982).
   v. Nigel Jenkins, "Thomas Jones and the Lost Book of the Khasis." The New Welsh Review 21 (1993): 56-82.

14 See 13 (v) above. 61.

15 John Roberts came to the Khasi Hills in 1871. Many Khasi scholars feel that the title of "the father of Khasi literature" belongs more properly to him as his literary contributions far outweigh that of the other missionaries."

16 See 13 (i) above. 83-84

17 This was according to R. S. Lyngdoh, writing in *"U Pahep Rabon Sing Kharsuka,"* Soso Tham Birth Centenary Celebrations Souvenir 1873-1973. Details as 1 above. 35.

18 See 13 (i-iv) above.

19 See 3 above. 53. All biographical details from here on are from this book unless indicated otherwise.

20 Soso Tham, *"Ki Symboh Ksiar," Ki Sngi ba Rim U Hynñiew Trep* (Shillong: Primrose Gatphoh, 1976) 3.

21 Matthew Arnold, "Switzerland: To Marguerite — Continued," The Golden Treasury of the Best Songs and Lyrical Poems in the English Language, ed. Francis Turner Palgrave (Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1964) 364.

22 As revealed by the poet in the preface. x.

23 ibid. xi.

24 Proper title unknown.

25 Noted writer and leader of Seng Khasi, R. Tokin Rymbai was a student of Soso Tham.

26 Quoted by F. M. Pugh in his *Ka Jingiarap ia ki Kot B. A. Khasi: Bynta III* (Shillong; F. M. Pugh, 1970) iv. See also 5 above.

27 Pablo Neruda, Memoirs, trans. Hardie St. Martin (Middlesex, UK: Penguin Books, 1984) 5.

28 As stated earlier this 'love' must be taken in the Khasi context.

29 From Joe Darion's song, "The Impossible Dream," as sung in Man of *La Mancha*, a television play by Dale Wasserman, based on Miguel de Cervantes y Saavedra's Don Quixote *de La Mancha*. Source: http://www.manoflamancha.com/index2.htm

Soso Tham

Pearls

Dew drops on the grass,
In the morning they glitter;
I too from home will depart
To hunt for these pearls.

From the grass that is green
They take off with the sun;
Like them then I'll plunge
To an unknown region.

The thorns though they prick
In a faraway street;
From home I'll depart
And return long after.

The heart too will grieve
Alone faraway;
The tears that gather
Are actually pearls.

Translated from Khasi by Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih

Stars

Look young men what lies ahead,
    That you may tell which way to step;

Ten Poems from Soso Tham's first poetry collection *Ka Duitara Ksiar*

There's a star that leads the way,
        Alive the name the glory stays.

Make an effort like other men,
        Work not only for your subsistence;
But also that you may ascend,
        From the very rungs of fame.

Or to pile up only wealth,
        And your boundaries to spread;
Because long they can't remain,
        Like reputation and a name.

Though you maybe small and weak,
        Quietly if you have to weep;
Who will say you cannot claim,
        Glory and a name.

Fear not if you have to plod,
        Through the fire or through blood;
Only brave men who are game,
        May reach the mountaintops of fame.

Though the sun beats down on you,
        Soon the cool breeze you'll taste too;
It's in all that's done diligently,
        That it lurks immortal glory.

Translated from Khasi by Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih

The Green Grass

Quietly in the wood,
        It grows among the weeds;
An uncommon blossom, *u tiew dohmaw,**
        A thing of lofty thoughts.

---

* A wild flower, symbol of great wisdom.

Quietly by shadowy streams,
To be a fragrance when faded,
The joy-giving fern
Remains green for twelve moons.

Tell me twilight, beloved of the gods,
And you the motley clouds;
Tell me where is that star
That first speckles the sky.

Quietly he lives, quietly he dies,
Amidst the wilderness;
Quietly in the grave let him rest,
Beneath the green, green grass.

Translated from Khasi by Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih

The Pine Tree

The sun beats down on me,
The wind lashes at me;
To the sky the branches spread
Through the earth the roots thread.

Alone I am the forest,
Though all alone I rise;
The thoughts are lofty,
That swirl inside me.

That every man is wise,
That who can deny;
Yet without a break,
How can he even speak.

Of a sudden a branch snaps,
All the town shivers;
It is only a paragon,
Who wins the love of all.

It is only in a paragon,
    That lies the will that lasts;
You may fault him all you can,
    But how will you root him out.

Like him I too must go,
    Like a man mightily must I fall;
Look, children of the earth,
    Like this I'm standing tall.

Translated from Khasi by Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih

The Days that are Gone

I will go to *ri*[1] Sohra to be among the hills,
The land of *u tiew sohkhah* and *u tiew pawang lum*;[2]
The land of *ka sim pieng*, the land of *u kaitor*,[3]
The land of valour, the land of culture.

Listen, in *ri* Sohra, that *ïewbah*[4] has arrived,
It resonates the cheering that the archery may be won!
It sinks into the caverns, from the sky too it creeps,
To a Khasi, a Pnar, a Bhoi, or a War.[5]

Its cliff-edges too overflow without end,
With the torrent that roars, the breeze that's tender;
And the heart that's forever youthful hums in the woods,
Thus rumble the gorges of *ri* War and reverberate the boulders.

Long have I departed from relations and friends,
Though others have gone, others linger on;
Thus the honour of Sohra and its silver seas,
Once more, once more, came dazzling to me.

---

1 Country.
2 Orchids.
3 Songbirds.
4 Big market day.
5 Names of the sub-tribes of the Khasis.

Thus the days that are gone, they surge and they surge,
I don't know the beginning or where they would end;
Only this I do know, that often I do want—
Once more, once more to be a child.

Translated from Khasi by Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih

Trot

Trot was one among the breed
Of dogs where dwelled a rarity:
He had a body, strong and healthy,
He was nimble as the breeze.

Among the weeds he stalked the weaver birds,
He ran after the swallows in the sky;
Into the forest he also charged,
In the water he swam and splashed.

The most beloved friend of Trot
A casual labourer:
A poor man; he persevered
For the children and his wife.

With him he skipped and danced;
At last the time arrived,
The master must depart from home,
And from his friends, his dearest ones.

And so he could not take his friend along.
To another realm:
Through chasms and inhospitable lands,
Alone he walked, all by himself.

The realm mysterious, it is that,
It is somewhere and everywhere;
The unknown there, the terrible,
It has no taboo, cares for none.

And from there, whosoever set foot in,
Young men or women;
Children, old ones, or infants,
They never did return.

And once they had crossed over,
One step into the edge;
They had no wish even for a fleeting look;
For nothing did they pine.

The world and its splendour,
The wealth that we treasure;
The youthful eye that loves all worldly things,
There they lose their meaning.

The eye of man would like to peer,
Into that deathly hush;
But the way to go there,
Is through the golden tears.

The agonizing mourning of man
Cannot find a resting stone;
They vanish the dirges that it moans
Into the wearying wastes.

So to the fore the master went,
Trot quietly by his side;
Behind his wife and weeping children,
Till the edge of a precipice.

What happened there, how he was mystified!
How else shall I describe;
Often he tried to plunge into the void,
Then to the house he fled.

He knew among them from then on,
Would cloak a darkness end to end;
That he tossed and whimpered restlessly,
The hearts turned to water completely.

Like others the days brightened,
Like others they would set;
Beneath the pines the master stretched,
Peacefully in the grave.

The swallow as always emerged,
From within the crevices;
But Trot alone he curled in grief,
Under the dripping porch.

The weaver bird and frisking deer
About the hills they ran:
Why wasn't Trot chasing them around!
Instead he slumbered on the ground!

Other generations yet will come,
Their monuments they will raise;
Will someone here and there,
Recall the memory of Trot!

Translated from Khasi by Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih

U Tiew Pathai*

When I recall your memory,
To a distant world I flee;
For a lifetime shall I dwell in the wilds,
The land of fruits and plenty.

Like a mist-covered waterfall,
Hiding its features;
I too, to other years,
Alone with falling tears.

Time flies, scuttles in a hurry,
When in your company;

---

* Literally a message-bearing flower, an orchid with a strong sweet scent.

Never shall I forget now,
In other days than those.

Though you have sunk beneath the earth,
A thousand times you will emerge;
U tiew-pathai on soggy ground,
From a distance bequeaths its fragrance.

Translated from Khasi by Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih

The Air is Still Fragrant

As if from a vision I wakened,
When I had my first sight;
From the sun that was hot,
Alone how she sat;
Though I knew her not,
Or, what her name was;
It was in her that on earth
I sought a heaven.

Like the rose that's hidden
In its own leaves;
That has its head bent,
In the air that's fragrant;
I loved more than mother,
And sweet was the name;
It was with her that on earth,
I savoured a heaven.

During days that were clear,
When the breeze too was cool;
When the grass was still green,
And the flowers were swinging;
To the slopes and the shades,
We strolled and wandered;
A little away from people,
It was there the heaven.

The rose is still hidden
In its own leaves;
It still has its head bent,
And the air is still fragrant;
Though she has gone far away,
Together with her name;
To another world,
To another heaven.

Translated from Khasi by Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih

The Bird that Is Free

Just when I was falling asleep, from a land faraway
Once not so long I listened to a song;
It was all very clear—the melodious voice,
The only daughter who had crossed the divide.

Often I had walked the days dark with cloud;
Yet from the lap of nature I received afterwards
Days that are cool and the sky that is clear,
When tired, and down came the tears.

Often I had listened to the bee as it flew,
To the songbird too, as it folded its wings;
In the lap of nature that they hummed melodious:
Ecstatic my soul and lofty my thoughts.

Forever did I love the hills that were hushed,
Often too I had watched the stream;
As it quarried its pools and carried off the gravel,
Thus I returned to my home to finish off my tasks.

The bird is now free and it sings from the thorn:
Why should I mourn for days that have gone;
I'll seek every time for the songs that are pure,
That are found everyday only in the fold of nature.

Translated from Khasi by Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih

The Cipher on the Stone

When still in my father's and mother's lap,
Though I survived on the herbs, the world yet was flat;
I bragged, I scorned, I daydreamed as a child;
I laughed, I cackled, to be good I could not.

When the river clamoured that it boiled without stop;
When I watched the grass that was green;
Like a hip-hopping bird inspecting itself, I enquired:
"Tell me o death, where do you live?"

Like a sturdy fruit tree that unfurled its branches,
When seasoned, and the thoughts had broadened;
That daydream later came to be seen,
As one of the ciphers etched on the stone.

The grass is now tanned that the river has ebbed,
It is then that I see—a mysterious Something that it comes;
The tongue is now tied and I cannot open my mouth,
Sunken in deep thought that winter has arrived.

Translated from Khasi by Kynpham Singh Nongkynrih ❑

Mahabharat and Environment

Dileep Jhaveri

Inventing a perpetual present from history, tradition or Imagination and extending it to a future for all times, enables a literary work to evolve into a classic. Constructed from a recognizable local setting an ever enlarging space is created that remains permanent and universal. Drawing substance from the contemporary life the classics appear convincing, but they become eternal because of the thrust derived from the fundamental questions that they ask. The classics raise more questions than the answers they provide. Generations after generations and in lands for apart they keep growing like forests adding a variety of frondescence they inspire and nurse.

Conceived by an adivasi fisherman on a riverbank in sylvan surroundings a tale expanded to an epic that is *Mahabharat.* Poets, versifiers, chroniclers, intellectuals, pedants, scholars, dogmatists, liberals, frauds, rural as well as urban bards went on adding to it. This was already anticipated by the dark adivasi poet dwelling on an island with an accommodating spirit and aptly named Vyas:

आचख्युः कवयः केचित् सम्प्रत्याचक्षते परे
आख्यासन्ति तथैवान्यै इतिहासमिमं भुवि

Reflected in *Mahabharat* are changing times of socio-politico-cultural-moral upheavals. The main body of *Mahabharat* bears evidence to this and its polymorphic manifestations are observed in several regions, languages and civilizations of Asia. This polymorphism transcends time and space. Its dynamism sustains life-traditions and nourishes imagination. *Mahabharat* continues inspiring us even today because it inquires into human nature, human relationships, man's links with Universe and God, and an individual's place within the defined society and indefinable self. Containing

several contradictions it is simultaneously deterministic and existentialistic. An insulted woman and defiled earth are at the centre of the narrative. Thus the contemporary issues of Feminism and Environment are cardinal in *Mahabharat*.

Reclaiming from collective memory environmental disasters of floods, glaciers, fires or volcanic eruptions cannot provide creative opportunities for an existentialist writer. There must be human involvement. Krishna Dwaipayan Vyas intentionally designs a situation of a clash between two civilizations after settling his matured principal characters in their placid daily life.

There is a self contained, peaceful, sylvan civilization in harmony with Nature. It is ruthlessly invaded by expansionist, urban, technologically advanced power, violent in nature. Khandav Van is set afire by Arjun and Krishna Vasudev as coveted by Agni.

Even when consented to in an inebriated state this act of Arjun and Krishna Vasudev is a willing act, a matter of choice. And from this choice consequences will follow inevitably and severally.

To protect Khandav Van Indra leads the entire pantheon of Gods. The adjectives used for Indra and references to his weapons evoke several prior myths, legends and perhaps actual history. His friendship with Takshak the chief of Nags or serpent tribe could well be an earlier historic pact of peaceful coexistence and cooperation between the force of urbanizers and power of primitives.

The weapons gifted to Arjun and Krishna Vasudev also may have historical significance as references are made to there earlier employment. In their audacity to challenge the supremacy of Indra his son Arjun and Krishna Vasudev, as incarnation of Vishnu who is Indra's younger brother, destroy not only the forest but a vaster ecological balance of cultures, history and mythology. Vyas describes in unsparingly vivid details and with intense sensitivity the carnage and the futile efforts to frustrate it. There is a deep, seething anger terminating into profound, paralytic pathos. Incensed and with revulsion at the senseless atrocity and repeatedly benumbed with sadness for the life destroyed, it is not easy to read the text without breaking down repeatedly. Henceforth unconcealed irony will accompany in addressing Arjun as Anagh—pious, without sin, and Krishna Vasudev as Veer Mahatma—brave and noble soul.

From stripping the earth of her forest it is only a short distance call to disrobe the glory of the victors. But the poet still desires to avoid the disgrace. What may be justifiable is not necessarily inevitable.

Since neither human behaviour nor the course of events is designed with mathematical elegance, baroque determinism can always stake a claim

to legitimacy. So a reluctance to commit an act does not acquit one from suffering unexpected but definite consequences. Sabha Parva succeeding the Khandav holocaust highlights human vanity and underlines inescapable tragic devastation that will follow.

Yudhishthir is the procrastinating hero presiding precariously and yet proudly over capital Indraprastha, approvingly eulogized by the sages in comparision with several other establishments of the Immortals. Flattered thus he is goaded to perform validating Rajasooya Yajnya. The farsighted adivasi grandfather of the extinctive Kuru dynasty furtively advises against. But the divine Krishna Vasudev overtakes the immortal Krishna Dwaipayan and the die against the mortal hero Yudhishthir is cast.

After engaging lesser rulers in futile battles to defeat them, decisively destroying defiant adversary of Krishna Vasudev that was Jarasandh and asserting indirectly over Antioch and Rome Yudhishthir pleasurably accepts rewards of environmental exploitation. Presented to him by royalties are gold, silver, jewels lacerated from the loins of the earth; horses, elephants, camels bereaved from her bosom; incense and resins peeled from her pelt; numberless nubile virgins nabbed from their nests and decked but in slavery. Not withstanding this effrontery there is further egregious excoriation of the environment. Species after species of wild life are slaughtered to obtain skins—tigers, deer, antelopes. The most reprehensible gift comes from the ruler of Kamboj offering purses and shawls woven from the down of birds and cats!

Engaged to keep an inventory of these presents was none other than Duryodhan, the classical cousin appointed by Yudhishthir himself. Here is a perfect mirror situation where indiscriminate acquiescence is reflected as indomitable avarice.

This juxtaposition is an opportunity to set a stage where unruly, impulsive and obdurate violation of Khandav Van and the avalanche of the abominable offerings at Rajsooya can be counterpoised by a carefully crafted catastrophic choreography to castigate peripatetic Arjun and prevaricating Yudhishthir both by a mere throw of dice. Yet to be punished, the omniscient Krishna Vasudev's absence from the scene is assured by engaging his omnipotence for avenging the molester of Dwarika, demon Shalva of Saubhnagar.

The disgrace of menstruating Draupadi (to remain barren in future) is as revolting and tragic and poignant as disgracing the fertile earth that is most holy to the Adivasi poet. For him the aim is not retribution but the demonstration of equivalence of both the acts of decadent civilization. (Like enslaved Draupadi the earth too is abandoned by the Creator)

The protagonists of power and the intellectual accessories of urbanization are unable to answer Draupadi's simple question: What is Dharma, the right way to preserve integrity and honour of life? Herein we realize that dishonour of Draupadi was not a revengeful motive of the Poet but a pointer of a parallel that was incomprehensible to the power hungry, wealth worshipping, environment exploiting, so called progressive consumerist society.

Like his predecessor Valmiki, Vyas is also fond of conveying his characters to forest for short sojourns or long exiles. Bringing them close to nature integrates and develops them. Even as punishment the stay in forest brings out the best in Pandu. After his death Vyas advises his own mother Satyavati and her daughters-in-law to retire to the woods to escape the unbearable loss and loneliness in Hastinapur with prophetic words: पृथ्वी गतयौवना

To Yudhishthir the forest provides an opportunity for reflection and maturity, and for Dhritarashtra the final tranquility in fiery dissolution. The inspired depictions of Nature, trees, flowers, birds, beasts and seasons, even though repeatedly borrowed from *Ramayan* revitalize the largely didactic language and reanimate the prolific narrative.

The strident poet of Hastinapur turns subtle in forest retaining his focus on environment. Banished to Kamyak Van Yudhishthir still has to support a large retinue of Brahmins that followed him. Everyday the four brothers go hunting in four directions. The wild life is getting decimated. One night the animals appear in a dream to Yudhishthir and beg him to spare them. He agrees and shifts to Dwaitavan. Promptly Vyas visits him and endows Pratismriti Vidya to him. This disguised blessing dramatically unveils the monumental tragedy of war in Stree Parva. After being cursed by Gandhari for his non-challance Krishna Vasudev is profusely abusive of Gandhari and womanhood in general, stunning everybody into silence. To break the impasse blind Dhritarashtra inquires Yudhishthir about the outcome of war. Prompt comes his reply aided by the ability to recall: One thousand sixty six million and twenty thousand dead, twenty four thousand one hundred and sixty five lost. These absurdly exact figures acquire a contextual significance with the unaccounted for loss of the wild life earlier. Justice is not a simple geometrical equation but a manifestation of the evolutionary process, that is a firm assertion by Krishna Dwaipayan Vyas.

The poet simultaneously has a rare and subtle sense of humour for articulating his concerns for environment. On two occasions a younger brother is admonished or advised by elder brother to desist from damaging Nature. While fetching golden lotus for Draupadi considerable havoc is

wrought by Bhim to the forest and forest guards of Kuber. On his return, obstructed by an old monkey, he is enraged further and frustrated finally. The prank is thoroughly enjoyed by Hanuman the elder brother, born of the common father Wind god. After revealing his identity in its full magnificence he has some words of advice for Bhim. He is asked to desist from plucking flowers. Again during the year of concealment at the end of the exile in Viratnagar there is an attack by Trigart ruler. Yudhishthir desires to assist the guardian king with the help of his brothers. Bhim is ready as ever. He volunteers to uproot a mighty tree and bash up the enemy army. Yudhisthir counsels against such a weapon lest it might reveal their identity. This is a genial way to advise the stormy son of Wind god to preserve the environment.

Accomodating by nature, Mahabharat has ample space for centuries to grow within it. This has resulted in several additions and alterations in main narrative. Diverse stories, anecdotes, instructions, admonitions, propaganda, kitsch, litter are dumped over its generosity. Carrying such enormous freight the epic has still remained vibrant. Mahabharat has achieved a literary ecological equilibrium that is symbolic of all-inclusive culture of Bharat. The original narrative is a warning to the exclusionists then and now, in the spirit of democracy and freedom that we find in the order of Nature where unicellular life and blades of grass and tall trees and birds, beasts, water-life and human beings coexists on the same scale. Centered on an all embracing ideal and extending the freedom of existence to every one, Mahabharat with the burden of plenty and our culture with the burden of poverty have survived till today.

Recommendations to plant trees, tend gardens, save forests, dig wells are scattered all over Mahabharat promising a place in heaven. Flora and Fauna and Birds and Water life are rejoicingly recounted in the style of Ramayan. While Valmiki employs musical, Vyas prefers pictorial power of the language. Vyas has a vast and tragic vision to describe.

Before the start of the war Vyas visits his blind son Dhritarashtra and prophecies the impending calamity. Try to imagine the world after some colossal nuclear disaster. Right from minute genetic mutations far reaching astronomical disorders are predicted: Multiple suns in the sky, dim, red, burning, black; solar and lunar eclipses; aberrant gyrations of planets and constellations; deranged seasons, rains of burning stones, dust storms, flaming meteorites, volcanic eruptions, drying rivers, overflowing oceans; rice plants each bearing several spikes of inferior grain, unexpected fruits on alien trees, monstrous animals, cows giving birth to hogs, precocious puberty of girls, eight year olds delivering deformed progeny that start incest right from birth.

This is a vision that can inspire scores of science fiction films. Devastation of environment on multiple scales spreads over earth, galaxies, genes, morality, mythology. And the cause is human greed. At a later date Yudhishthir actually confesses to a desire of possessing Duryodhan's wealth in the game of dice that dealt the disastrous blow. This desire to possess has blurred the difference between right and wrong. Dharma has been abandoned by both sides. This dark prophecy has lost not the least relevance today. That is why Mahabharat remains contemporary even now. The message is simple: Take care of the environment and give up greed.

Even the poet of tragic Vyas is not a cynic. Even as he rebels against and attempts to sabotage plans of self proclaimed Creator and Destroyer of Life (occasionally Krishna Vasudev is kept in suspense by Krishna Dwaipayan by poetic subterfuge) he asserts his faith in life in the face of destruction. He paints war in its gory vividity of death and vivid glory of life. His giddy imagination produces swirling pictures.

The battlefield is overcast with dark clouds, eclipsed sun and moon, menacing planets, evil comets and ominous constellations; dark and bloody rain cascades, burning pallets shower from the sky; vultures, jackals and wolves crowd around; the horses neigh with fear, elephants trumpet in distress, they also urinate and defecate with fright; with such ill omens rivers of blood flow in Kurukshetra and dark slime smears everything.

This is the sinister back drop of Death.

And now the Poet of faith in life begins to paint.

The severed heads of warriors float like shining lotuses in the bloody river; their hair spread like rippling duckweed; limbs of horses and elephants spin like turtles, sharks, alligators; a warrior adorned with wounds is resplendent like a Palash tree in blossom; a dying hero falls from his chariot like a Champak tree uprooted from a cliff by storm; before his death Drona stands erect in his chariot, with every part of his body pierced by quivering arrows shining in the last rays of the sun, like a tree in monsoon evening lit up by fire flies.

And suddenly you realize that in the face of death the poet is asserting living images of life itself. And this Life is trees and flowers and birds and fishes and eternity.

While painting the picture of war Krishna Dwaipayan is at his best in depicting the death of Karna. It recalls the clash between two earlier cultures when Indra the rain and thunder god established his supremacy over universal sun god. Indra's son Arjun vanquishes Soorya's son Karna. The sun is setting in glorious red colours and clouds are gathering. Shalya describes the twilight scene of battlefield in its tragic resplendence

to Duryodhan. In that large chapter four lines on dying horses are poignant.

शरावभिन्नैः पतितैस्तुरंगमैः
श्वसद्भिरार्तैः क्षतजं वमद्भिः
दीनं स्तनद्भिः परिवृत्तनेत्रै
र्मरीं दशद्भिः कृपणं नदद्भिः

The wounded and fallen horses breathe with difficulty, spew blood, moan piteously, with eyes rolling bite at the earth, whimper pathetically. Between two pillars of the sound of moaning and whimpering, on the bitten earth an arch is erected envisioned by the circling gaze. The fragility of life is enduringly supported by the empathy of the poet deeply sensitive to the suffering of the horses. These are the same horses that draw the chariot of sun. These are the horses that symbolize life force. These horses like us are part of the same universal continuity. Vyas is a universal poet and Mahabharat is a universal epic. Mahabharat has no need to be superior to other epics for proving its validity, Vyas has no need to belittle any poet from past or future to be great because the dark, islander Vyas is all the poets writing together from one point of circle to the other end. Mahabharat has kept a count of all: you, me, birds, beasts, trees, leaves, blades of grass, grains of dust. These are the original numbers of stanzas in Mahabharat, which is the largest poem, as large as this earth that belongs to everyone. This earth is धूलि and we are fortunate that ए धुलाते तिलक पडे छि भाले.

❑

Rethinking the Nation

Satish C. Aikant

Nation as a contested category has received widespread attention resulting in several recent critiques of 'nation' and 'nationalism'. However, these critiques are mostly informed by western historiography, so that it is invariably made out as if nation, arising out of a nebulous state, has to be "imagined into existence".[1] Benedict Anderson defines the nation as an 'imagined community,' born with the demise of feudalism and the rise of capitalism. For postcolonial critics this definition, however, is not unproblematic since while referring to constructions of nation and nationalism with regard to Third World countries Anderson underlines their dependency on the European models with the contention that the American and European experiences 'were now everywhere modularly imagined.' In the colonies, wherever the native intelligentsia played a crucial role in mobilizing support against the colonial powers, it was given out as if the anti-colonial nationalism was itself made possible and shaped by European political and intellectual history. The received history of nationalism argues for two kinds of nationalism: Eastern and Western. By the logic of this Us-Them divide, Western nationalisms are deemed capable of generating their own models of autonomy from within, whereas Eastern nationalisms have to assimilate something alien to their own cultures before they can become modern nations.

If nationalisms in the rest of the world have to choose their imagined community from certain modular forms already made available to them by Europe and the America, what are they left with to imagine? Even our imaginations must remain forever colonised. The real tragedy, however, occurs when postcolonial nationalisms internalise rather than problematize the Western blueprint in the name of progress, which, however, seems difficult to avoid since the immediate history of these nations happens to be Western, and there are no easy ways available to

reclaim a pure and uncontaminated history prior to the ravages of colonialism.

To break away from this debilitating paradigm Partha Chatterjee draws a distinction between nationalism as a political movement, which challenges the colonial state, and nationalism as a cultural construct, which enables the colonised to posit their difference and autonomy. The former is 'derivative' but the latter draws its energies from other sources. Chatterjee points out that the official histories of Indian nationalism would in fact correspond to Anderson's thesis. His argument is that anti-colonial nationalism attempts to create its own domain of sovereignty within colonial society. It does so by diving the world into a material, outside sphere constituted of the economy, statecraft, science and technology, and a spiritual, inner domain of culture (which includes religion, customs and the family). The supremacy of the West is conceded in the material domain, whereas the spiritual world is claimed as the essence of national culture, one that must be protected and defended. The more the colonised peoples imitate Western skills in the former sphere, the greater the need to protect the latter:

> The bilingual intelligentsia came to think of its own language as belonging to that inner domain of cultural identity, from which the colonial intruder had to be kept out; language therefore became a zone over which the nation first had to declare its sovereignty and then had to transform in order to make it adequate for the modern world.[2]

The assertion of a spiritual or inner core thus becomes the site for the construction of national identities across a wide political and ideological anti-colonial spectrum. Ernest Renan in his essay "What is a Nation?" (1882) had stressed a similar position that 'a nation is a soul, a spiritual principle'.[3] The communities that are imagined by anti-colonial nationalism often invoke a shared past or a cultural essence that is regarded as synonymous with a religious or racial identity.

It is interesting that when Nehru wrote his book on India, he called it *The Discovery of India*, for he was conscious of the fact that he was making a discovery, and not an invention, in the sense of an intellectual or imaginative construction. After his westernised upbringing and with a mind that matured in the West, he does get a cultural shock when confronted with the Indian reality, but he frankly confesses it, and emerging out of his alien self, he identifies himself with his roots, knowing that in order to participate in the great drama of Indian freedom movement

and to have the 'tryst with destiny', he would have to integrate himself into the Indian ethos, without forsaking his intellectual refinements. So even his avowed agnosticism does not obstruct him from appreciating the Indian values, the civilizational greatness of India, and the cultural traditions it has fostered down the ages. His last Will and Testament is a remarkable document which shows where his heart really was.

What is ironic about the entire approach of the western idea of progress and modernity, as well as their linear models, is that in their flagging moments they had to incorporate the so-called ahistorical, mythical and cyclical (but organic) patterns of non-western cultures. The Other became important for the re-definition of western societies and cultures. Perhaps, in their bid for survival, they needed the radical support of the potent, vibrant and regenerative attributes that were being lost in the wake of the failure of the Enlightenment project, and the construction of the Other was their historical necessity. With the decline of the Enlightenment, its legacy was taken up by Orientalism that saw its heyday during the ascendancy of imperialism. This collusion was broken by anti-colonial movements that in turn bolstered nationalism. But the invidious attempts to perpetuate western hegemony continue to this day, so much so that Frederic Jameson discredits 'nationalism' in the third world countries by registering its disappearance from the First World. Harish Trivedi makes an interesting point that it was "like some harmful drugs which the First World safely banned from its own consumption"[4] to make the Third World the dumping ground. Observations such as Jameson's are characteristic of the myopia of the western academics, who altogether ignore the historical context in which nationalism was consolidated in the Third World countries, and which gained strength not just on account of the acceptance of western liberal tradition in these countries, but mainly because of a fiercely anti-imperial stand. It is often maintained that British education helped forge nationalism in India. But surely that was not the avowed aim of colonial education. It no doubt provided a certain thematic based on British liberal doctrines, but it could not be automatically translated into practice, given the exigencies of colonial economy. There were also those who saw British literary education as unmitigated blessing for the natives, while the British were at their 'civilizing mission', and even the 'bhadraloka' of Bengal were no less charmed by it. Bankim Chandra, a full-fledged nationalist himself, was ambivalent in his attitude to imperialism. On the one hand he was enamoured of their rationality, material prosperity, science and industrialization, and on the other in his aspiration for nationalism he found spiritualism as the core Indian value. Such dichotomy of the material and the spiritual which privileged the latter provided rationale

for 'essentialism' which was perfectly in consonance with the objectives of the British colonial power. To say that India was predominantly spiritual and otherworldly was to provide justification for the material expansion of the West and give it a free rein to exploit indigenous material resources. Further, a native sense of identity was construed as the idea of modernity, according to western paradigms. So that nations like India were forced to choose between "being themselves" and "being modern nations" as though the universal standards of reason and progress were natural to the West. The consequent universalising mission was carried out with violence, coercion, and deracination. We can see how this projection perpetrates the ideology of a dominant common world where the West leads naturally and the East follows in an eternal game of catch up where its identity is always in dissonance with itself. Such a neat distinction between the spiritual and the material, in effect, does not exist. Even a cursory glance at India's historical past will reveal that a holistic approach has characterised its world-view in which the tenets of dharma, artha, kama and moksha are interwoven. Yet it is also true that the core value of Indian tradition remained spiritualism, and this is the aspect which was highlighted by Bankim to score over the overtly western materialism. It was when the Indians overlooked their dharma that they unwittingly helped the cause of imperial expansion. We may recall Gandhi's warning:

> The English have not taken India; we have given it to them. They are not in India because of their strength, but because we keep them....Recall the Company Bahadur. Who made it Bahadur? They had not the slightest intention at the time, of establishing a kingdom. Who assisted the Company's officers? History testifies that we did all this.[5]

Gandhi had no patience with the elitist view which held in doubt that India was existing as a nation:

> The English have taught us that we were not one nation before and that it will require centuries before we become one nation. This is without foundation. We were one nation before they came to India. One thought inspired us. Our mode of life was the same. It was because we were one nation that they were able to establish one kingdom and subsequently divided us. (132-33)

Further, he does not believe in the divisibility principle:

> India cannot cease to be one nation because people belonging to different religions live in it. The introduction of foreigners does not necessarily destroy the nation, they merge in it. A country is one nation only when such a condition obtains in it. That country must have a faculty for assimilation. India has ever been such a country. (136)

Nehru, despite his different perceptions, but with more historical sense, saw nothing inherently superior about the West to categorise it sharply in juxtaposition with the East:

> I do not understand the use of the words Orient and Occident, except in the sense that Europe and America are highly industrialized and Asia is backward in this respect. This industrialization is something new in world history. There is no organic connection between Hellenic civilization and American civilization.[6]

In other words, Europe and America's industrial progress was in no way affiliated to, or consequent upon the Hellenic civilization. It merely occurred at a disjunction of history. Ironically, such industrial progress was denied to a colonial country like India because it did not suit the interests of the colonial powers. But this lack of material progress among Indians was attributed to their spiritual preoccupation and otherworldly outlook. It was a strange twist to the western man's appropriation of nature. Subsequently, the science of nature became a paradigm for all social sciences, the key word being *control*—control of nature, and by extension, the control of human agency. Knowledge, then, became embedded in power, and power became self-legitimising. Control of (colonial) man, ostensibly to 'civilise' him became the *summum bonum* of rationality of the western man's mission.

The colonial period had a doubly demoralizing effect on India—there was plunder of its material resources, and there was a disruption of cultural awareness that weaned people away from their moorings. Nehru was to remind his people about their own traditions:

> There seemed to me something unique about the continuity of a cultural tradition through five thousand years of history, of invasion and upheaval, a tradition which was widespread among the masses and powerfully influenced them.[7]

What is unique about Indian culture is that for all its resilience and dynamism there is an abiding component of tradition:

> Tradition has to be accepted to a large extent and adapted and transformed to meet new conditions and ways of thought, and at the same time new traditions have to be built up.(53)

It is obvious that neither Gandhi nor Nehru defines 'nation' simply in terms of spatial coherence, but in terms of 'people'—their civilizational unity, their beliefs, and common cultural heritage. The unity, again, does not grow out of the imposition of a monolithic order, but out of the freedom for acceptance and rejection, and that is why even in the midst of the rigidities of ritualistic religions and orthodoxy, the heterodox systems have coexisted on the soil of India. The medieval saint poets in their playful subversion underlined the essential humanitarian strands in the core doctrines of various Hindu and Muslim sects, and it is they who forged the bonds of unity across the length and breadth of this country. It is, again, such nationalistic 'voices' which, though emerging from their historical specificities and firmly grounded in the local cultures, gain acceptance outside their boundaries, for they speak for mankind that neither the nation nor the race can restrict. The concept of humanity is not altogether abstract. It takes its starting step from nationality itself and transcends it in its culminating moments. Nation, then, is prior to everything and is an originating principle, and it is national culture that helps mould specific peoples and individuals. These notions are interconnected and it is only when the individuals have received imprint of their culture that they can graduate to humanity. The gradual absorption of the external, shapes the individual in all dimensions in a process of cultural symbiosis. This is what has given resilience to Indian character. Individuals as nationalised subjects, then, appear not in hierarchical order, but transparent and equal to one another. It is a mistaken belief that unity of a nation is incumbent upon homogeneity. On the other hand, national spirit or character also allows for coexistence of various contradictory tendencies and it is also the spirit of scepticism that gives a society a dynamic way of life.

All such (inter)national figures as Shakespeare, Goethe, Kalidasa and Sankara, though emerging on particular social space at particular historical moments, transcended their circumstances as their works embody 'universal truths'. This is true of some of our modern writers such as Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan whose appeal is not related to an anxiety for cosmopolitanism, or in subsuming the local into the universal, but for

rising above these categories. Professor C. D. Narasimhaiah finds in such writers a modernity "suffused throughout with traditional values."[8] It is in such writings that nation and nationalism begin to dissolve their hegemonies.

If we look at the canonical writings and the critical discourses, we can easily notice how literature, too, operated through different social spaces in different national formations employing various signifying practices, but the crux of the matter is that only those texts have been canonized that legitimate nationhood. In the Indian context, the age-old values have found expression in our canonical works.

The recurring myths of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* have provided themes and formal patterns to our literatures down to the contemporary novels written in English, a comparatively late entrant into the Indian literary scene. The novel, European in its form, uses several subtexts of our mythic lore, and even the contemporary works cannot avoid them, as has been done by Shashi Tharoor in *The Great Indian Novel*. Much of the fabulation of the contemporary Indian writing stems from indigenous resources, be it *Arabian Nights* or the *Jatakas*. Even the Indian diasporic writers with their mandatory Indian connection and condescending attitudes would be starved of their themes if they did not hark back to their tenuous roots—not much unlike our colonial marauders who exploited native resources for uses abroad. And yet we have a Bharati Mukherjee vehemently calling herself an 'American Novelist' and a Vikram Seth whose *A Suitable Boy* is debunked by Salman Rushdie as a 'great Indian soap' though perhaps Rushdie wanted to highlight his own 'magic realism' (whatever that may mean; 'magic', one would imagine, has a profoundly transforming quality. Whether Rushdie's works qualify this criterion is anybody's experience).

Rousseau maintained that love of mankind was nothing but love of justice, and we could extend this axiom to include the love of one's own country. I use the word 'country' to situate it prior to nation-state that was a later development. Nationalism in this sense is also a cultural prerogative. It is in fact the cultural differentiations that fix identities at a particular political or historical juncture. But to maintain that 'nation' came into existence only at a specified historical moment is to deny a whole people their collective memory. This idea militates against the non-western cultures which privilege traditions and view modernity not as a disjunction or an imposition but as an evolution through a dynamic process of selection and rejection. Nation, therefore, develops not as an excrescence but embodies growth of communal experience. To reject nation is to disown a heritage. By the same logic an absolute rejection,

or refusal to discriminate between nationalisms, would be to cut oneself off from an effective cultural engagement, or what could be the problem of a post-colonial intellectual, to cut him off from effective political action.

The idea of nationhood is not a cultural apotheosis. It is only that it acquires a political edge to formally bind together disparate elements, and within the multiplicities in a national formation, a dialectic constantly works to polarise and synthesize the different cultural strands that finally takes it to world culture, or to what Raymond Williams calls 'anew planetary consciousness'.

One reason why 'nation' is construed as an imaginary construct is that the West believed that it was not something that could be scientifically defined, and that for its very existence it depended upon an apparatus of cultural fictions in which imaginative literature played a decisive role, so that the rise of European nationalism was also seen as coeval with particularly the rise of the Novel. In the non-western cultures, however, and particularly in India, the rise of the novel/initially took up the white man's burden and was faced with the problem of containing in its form a thematic that was not western, and of conveying the collective experience as against the western individualism, something that could never be accepted as a *value* in the Indian context.[9]

There is need to decolonise and to disabuse ourselves of such myths as 'civilizing mission' and 'dark continent' (Naipaul's variant for India as 'An Area of Darkness') which constituted the conceptual armoury of imperialism to subjugate major chunks of the globe. Substituting one form of hegemony by another is no freedom. One doesn't have to be a votary of Foucault to see the role of power in various interrelations; such power-plays are so pervasive that each individual experiences them, and if he is sensitive enough, knows their oppression. Aṣhis Nandy warns us about the subtle invasion:

> It is now time to turn to the second form of colonization, the one which at least six generations of the Third World have learnt to view as a prerequisite for their liberation. This colonialism colonizes minds in addition to bodies and it releases forces within the colonized societies to alter their cultural priorities once for all. In the process, it helps generalize the concept of modern West from a geographical and temporal entity to a psychological category. The West is now everywhere, within the West and outside; in structures and in minds.[10]

Nationalism should result in a double decolonisation. Mere political decolonisation and the resultant celebration of freedom however momen-

tous, does not by itself inaugurate a new history, a new subject and a new and free sense of agency. It is of vital importance that nationalist thought coordinate a new and different space that is not complicit with the universal subject of Eurocentric Enlightenment; a space where nationalist politics could fashion its own epistemological, cognitive, and representational modalities.

With Marshal McLuhan's prophetic vision of a global village now nearer than ever before, caught as the world is in the tentacles of ever-widening communication networks and multinationals at our doorsteps, everybody will share Nandy's anxiety but few would know how to get out of the clutches of the 'intimate enemy'. Is it possible to find a solution and devise strategy for decolonisation with our intellectual tools fabricated and honed at the western academy? Gandhi, one of the most original minds of this century, of course, had a way. He would keep the windows of his house open to all incoming winds, but refused to be blown off his feet. Some of Gandhi's prescriptions may be redundant, but his mode of resistance to the western dominance retains its validity.

Rethinking the nation requires of us to inquire into the existing social structures and ideological postures, to reinstate relationships and institutions that give coherence to cultural unity, which is often disarticulated through a post-structuralist contention that there is no direct, extra-discursive access to the real-ignoring the fact that the direct does not exhaust the real and that it must carefully negotiate with the non-discursive, at times even leave the field to it. We must come to terms with all inclusiveness, which is not only the most important characteristic of culture, but also provides the much needed confidence to 'nation', that frees it from any hegemonic representation.

Notes

1. The historical bias is apparent going by the titles of works by the western scholars or those informed by the western historiography. See for instance, Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983); Ronald Inden, *Imaging India* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990); Ainslie T. Embree, *Imaging India: Essays on Indian History* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989) and Sudipta Kaviraj, "The Imaginary Institution of India", in Partha Chatterjee and Gyanendra Pandey, eds., *Subaltern Studies VII* (Delhi: Oxford University Press) 1992. See also Tom Nairn, *Faces of Nationalism: Janus Revisited* (London: Verso, 1997).
2. Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), p.7.

3. Ernest Renan, "What is a Nation?", trans. M. Thorn, in H. K. Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 19.
4. Harish Trivedi, "Theorizing the Nation: Constructions of 'India' and 'Indian Literature' " *Indian Literature,* 160 (March-April 1994), p.34.
5. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, "Hind Swaraj", in *The Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Vol.IV,* (Ahmedabad:Navjivan Publishing House, 1968), p. 123. *Hind Swaraj* was written in Gujarati in 1909 and was first published in an English translation in Johannesburg in 1910 after the original edition was proscribed by the Government of Bombay.
6. Quoted in Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 134.
7. Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1981), p.52.
8. C. D. Narasimhaiah, "Literature in the Global Village", in *The Indian Critical Scene: Controversial Essays* (New Delhi: D.K. Publishers, 1990), p.210.
9. See Meenakshi Mukherjee, *Realism and Reality: The Novel and Society in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986)
10. Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), p.xi.



Home and Homelessness in *The Hungry Tide*: A Discourse Unmade

Saswat S. Das

Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide* is about relationships, which are configured around metaphors of 'home' and 'homelessness'. Though nowhere in his narrative the author sounds judgemental, he would like to present the uniqueness of his diasporic experience, whose credibility and authenticity have been challenged from several quarters, particularly by those who claim to be more genuine in their narration of local experiences due to their rootedness, for a large period of time, to a specific milieu, which, while triggering off a series of experiences, both contextual and reductive, shapes the identities of those writing within it. The irony however lies in the fact that the author while pretending to make space for his fiction beyond the post modern debate, which cruises endlessly on the fluidity of our conditions, shaped and enhanced by the radical geopolitics of the new age, has displayed 'homelessness' as the natural condition of man. The author, while speaking for himself, has chosen to make space for those, who, unlike him, have been writing from and within the centre especially the postcolonial authors who have striven to carve out a place for themselves in third world homes while paradoxically endorsing the viewpoint that the state of homelessness, of being in a cultural void, is a source of enlightenment. That a typical postmodern author collects a cultural ragbag of sorts which he curiously gathered during his journey into different countries is at the root of an assumption which portrays the struggle of Bangladesh refugees to find a permanent abode only to prove the nullity and vacuity of the whole exercise. The hidden motif of 'home' negotiates its way through numerous treacherous experiences only to give itself in finally to authorial treachery.

It is interesting to see how the author has made way for those who prefer hinterlands and bohemias of their own instead of falling into the trappings of settled fixities. A networked study of some of the major characters in the fiction would make the point. While attempting to do so I have of course assumed that the reader is familiar with the text and the characters.

Though Kanai lives in a translated world, a world at once unreal and vacuous, he is not at ease while journeying through the socio-cultural hinterlands. Kanai's fall, in a literal sense, indicates nature's way of rejecting those who rush into its fold without understanding its law, which is one of perpetual change and transformation. Kanai's return to the world where he came from, is indirectly a comment on those who cannot live life beyond the confines of a routine, that is spun like a paralyzing web within the cozy spaces of habitats, called 'home'. A fine distinction between the statements made by Piya and Nilima—'home is where the Orcellas are' 'home is wherever I can brew a pot of good tea' outlines a hidden presence that divides two sets of characters sheltering opposing concepts of 'home' and 'homelessness'. On one hand there are characters, who see home as a site of conflict, on the other there are those, who see it as a metaphor for unity and harmony, a single unifying principle that reconciles and binds the opposing elements. The characters, who live their lives around the conflicting poles of home and homelessness, are Nilima and Nirmal. Nilima is enterprising and she can do anything to secure the space, to which she belongs, space by which she lives her dreams and innate desires, lending them her vivid presence. She is entirely rooted in her socio-cultural milieu, which she has only partly created and yet which she owns wholly by encompassing a section of humanity within it. She is disappointed with Nirmal, who wears unsettlement as a kind of lifestyle apparel, flapping along, away from the specificities of one's existence into a state of reckless fluidity where one may attach oneself to any or all destinations considered serious and worth fighting for. A selfless state, a state where one experiences a unique fusion with the world's problems is one to which Nirmal graduates. On the contrary Nilima cannot emerge out of her state of fixity, her self-created universe of Lusibari. Transcendence of any kind for her is an act of transgression, for every place has its law. Nirmal, by this law is a violator, an intruder into that single uninformed existence that Nilima at once substantiates and celebrates, through her dedication to her reinvented space. Nilima is the history of Lusibari created in an imagined space, Nirmal is the poetry of the world as written by Rilke and as secure as a copy book in a revolutionary shoulder bag. It is interesting to see Nilima as history,

appearing at the homing point of all destinies while the irony lies in the fact that she, as the imagined history of all at Lusibari, fails to chain the characters to the locale in which she is deeply entrenched. Nirmal chases a romantic ideal across the margin of history with Rilke for company which finally collapses in the illusory space between what the Bangladeshi refugees claim as home and what renders them 'homeless'. He inhabits the illusory space that challenges the notion of home as a hospitable domain and yet home is where the revolutionaries are, and that space could be anywhere in the world.

Now about Fokir and Moyna. Though transcendence is Moyna's objective, her preparation for it starts at home; home is where she has learnt to overcome the imponderables erected by destiny. A yardstick measures her achievements, which is entirely local. In the local universe of Lusibari Moyna and Nilima are the pathfinders, incarnating the subtlest and surest ways to achieve success. Home for them is sacrosanct, for it is here that preparation to meet the challenges of life begins. Fokir by this token is a violator of the harmony that home stands for. He experiences complete union with the river, which respects no boundaries or culture, washing ashore myriad possibilities only to dissolve them in its abysmal depth. River is a passion for Fokir, who identifies each and every moment of its life with his own, the placid moments and also the deeply ferocious ones that lie within. Lusibari, for Fokir is a prison where he broods and sulks. He is the counterpoint of Moyna, whose ambition to rise above her surrounding is only a brief episode in Fokir's drama of escape. It is this desire for escape that brings Fokir close to Piya, the river-woman looking for strange creatures from water. Piya is an American, separated from Fokir by an unbridgeable chasm, but then it is only Fokir who symbolically manages to sail through it. Moyna's love for her home is her greatest strength, she exploits the possibilities available there, whereas Fokir's love for life across the frontiers, towards which the river flows is what sustains him.

Now about Kanai and Piya. Kanai inhabits a lingo-centric world. Language is his power, a weapon he wields while making conquests. Home for him, as he rightly says, is the translated world, a world where language acts as an instrument to dilute the objective reality. His failure is the failure of language and he realizes it the moment he faces the reality outside. Piya on the other hand spends little time in romancing with words and through her journey that regulates most of her life, she redefines home as a shifting domain, a place that can be created anywhere in the world. Her final statement that home for her is where Orcellas are is a trifle too arty and Ghosh's brilliant juxtapositions, so assiduously worked out

until then, fail to rescue him from the burden of that banal expression. In fact he overworks the idea of home at the wrong end of the novel only to show that there is that fatal chink in his multicultural armour. His Indian 'middle class snobbery' is hopelessly passe and his authorial signature irredeemably contrived. Between the Orcella and the tea-cup he loses his initial verve and settles for an easy way out by dispatching Kanai back to his job, by allowing Nilima the last word. The last word fails to raise a tempest in any one's half-sipped tea-cup. The end of the endless novel loses its characters to their individual spaces and the promising beginnings wither out one by one until the very last. The idea of 'home' in the river-country is nothing short of the gift of the river. The idea of "homelessness' too can be traced back to the river. After all, what does the hungry tide do but devour homes, leaving the residual silt of its wrath as the fecund origin for new homes. Ghosh fails to measure up to the huge canvas he selects. Filling that huge canvas with collages undermines his art as much as it fails to arouse the sleepy story line.

It would be interesting to see how the diametrically opposite concepts of 'home' and homelessness, pass into each other and how the characters while appearing to incarnate these opposing concepts have done service to neither. The idea of home is sustained, both through fixity and ceaseless negotiations in space. A specific location can be called 'home' as long as one lives there. But when that location is made to cast its shadow on its inhabitants, dogging their steps and compelling them to return to its fold, it becomes a tyranny endorsed by those who see locations as inalienable and integrated wholes of their consciousness from which escape proves both treacherous and futile. The novelist's only intention in presenting home and homelessness as opposing concepts is to finally show them as one and he does this by reworking on the binary and eventually erasing the boundary that divides the two. The possibility of return is denied in the text. Return, if any, as it has been portrayed in the text is not a return into origins or specified locations. It is a return that carries with it tools that further contaminates the imagined purity of specified locations, the tools are so powerful that they crudely violate the ideologies of a particular location that shaped one's identity. The novel, sadly, loses its bearing at this high point, a contestable highpoint without its high priest!

It is the consciousness of homelessness that destroys Nirmal. Nirmal's revolutionary ideals are directed towards securing a place for Bangladeshi refugees, picking up along the way a few lessons in fluidity and leaving the undone work to Rilke in a rigid-frame of ill-fitting poetry. The

dichotomy between home and homelessness rips him apart as he decides to walk on a path that his ideals have not paved for him. Removing him from the specificities of his location, his ideals expose a duality that Nirmal fails to understand. His commitment towards the cause of Bangladeshi refugees is at best a romantic ardour that displays both his inability to understand this duality that propels him towards a fight for a permanent space, while making him forsake the comfort of fixed locations. It is the trappings of age-old thinking, the consciousness of home as a fixed destination and the consciousness of homelessness as a state of degeneration that make him take up cudgels for the refugees, sidelining the disclosure that his ideals secretly harbour a creative exposure that home is the seat of homelessness. Good poetry, but bad fiction. Even his fiery notebook cannot save Nirmal from a faceless end.

Nilima's and Moyna's consciousness of home are the most entrenched in the test. To move across specific location for Nilima would mean a sort of betrayal of the bond she has built with it after years of dedication towards the social progress of the community, which lives there. Things are however different in the case of Moyna. She doesn't experience the kind of attachment that Nilima experiences for her location, which in her case acts as a confinement, tying her down to the mundane chores, which she would like to abandon in her search for a better future, which may hold for her the promise of a release from the life of confinement. Both Nilima and Moyna have a heightened awareness of their surrounding, of the place that would shape their destinies. While Moyna's immobility has to be seen in the context of the unique relationship she forms with the place, Moyna's entrenchment has to be explained in terms of lack of opportunities and scope, which she might have gained had she attempted to form an alliance with Kanai. Lusibari is home for Nilima and Moyna, because both of them have chosen to stay there. Mad they moved to other places, they would have formed new linkages with space and time that would have undermined their initial anchorage. Home for Nilima means commitment, not the contours of a geographical location whereas for Moyna it means deprivation. Moving, for both of them, to a new place would not mean homelessness; it would rather be a gesture towards finding a new space for sheltering their desires. Home in other words is an unending quest, Nilima at the beginning of the end, and for Moyna of the end of the beginning.

Kanai, as he claims, lives in a translated world, a world to which he returns, when his love for Piya goes unreciprocated. A return to home for him means unreciprocated love and pursuit of new desires. If one

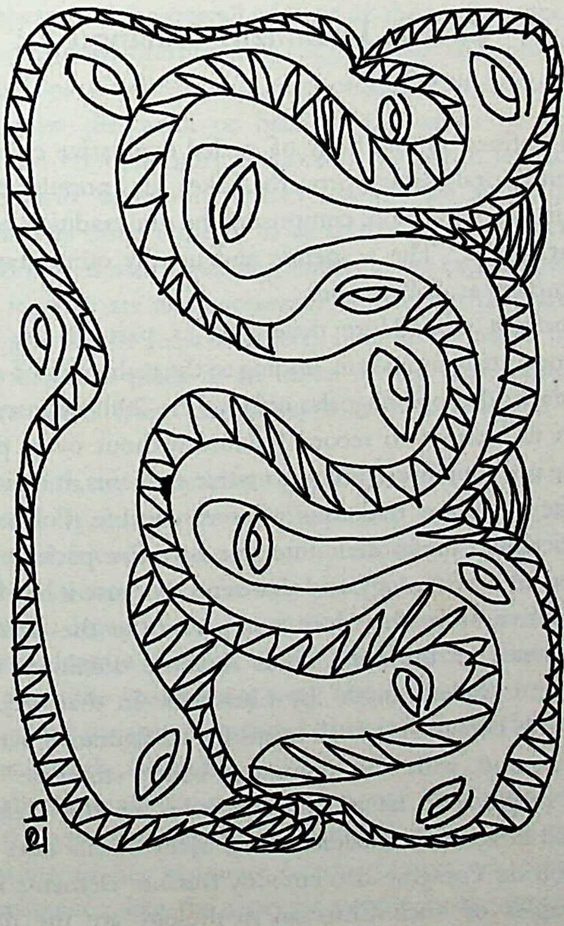
views his life in Lusibari, one would be compelled to say that it had become home for him by virtue of his living there, gathering manifold experiences into the coherence of realization. But such realization is not a local product; it could show up anywhere. And eventually one has to agree that wisdom-gaining exercise happens mostly outside the spatial territory, which holds you, and that is why the contrivance of the long river-journey in open space. Fokir's and Piya's cases are of course too obvious to discuss. They see their river-journey together as a metaphor for a home that never was, that never would be. Piya chases dolphins, who carry her always across fixed boundaries and Fokir remains trapped in the river, caught between its ebb and tide.

Ghosh in *The Hungry Tide* flips the theoretical underpinnings of the postmodern debate. His purpose is not merely to deconstruct the binary that holds home and homelessness as counterpoints, but to unite them as parts of an integrated whole. In deconstruction, elements rarely add up into a united, comprehensive whole. Rather, an artistic creation exposed to deconstructivc strategy stands as a house divided against itself. Ghosh works by a method that can be called deconstructive, but then his ostensible objective is to create an independent discourse, where terms such as home and homelessness can have meaning only when they are seen as containing each other, not as independent entities, locked in an eternal battle to gain access into recent discursive fields. Home is where one lives and this can be anywhere in the world. Homelessness by this token is a state of enlightenment, containing all the suppressed desires of home, a route into dialectics that feeds on a realization that it is necessary for one to have a home first, in order to lose it. The ephemeral home of the river dolphins stands as the perpetual backdrop against which *The Hungry Tide* writes its mythical story.

At the end of it all, *The Hungry Tide* swallows up both 'home' and 'homelessness' along with their multiple inhabitants, and what remains like silt under the raging water is Bonbibi's kingdom of entropy without a trace of the authorial injunction written with a finger of water on the vast body of the river. The Bangla original which is in Ghosh's mind would perhaps have made the discourse, which Ghosh has got unmade in English. Nirmal, Nilima, Fokir, Piya, Moyna, even Lusibari, Bondevi and the river would have got their tongues of fire in Bangla. The grand human discourse, which, Ghosh thinks his authorial splashes of water on the English canvas has created, is a non-starter. It remains buried in Bengali life-experience and Bangla folklore much like the mighty Sundarbans that remains buried in its ebbs and tides. Human discourses, when they lose their tongues of fire, languish as watery metaphors in translation

and die in the hands of the very author who served a translation as original. Loss of discourses, their systematic decimation and eventual destruction in English fictions in India was never more poignant as in *The Hungry Tide*. If the non-Indian English reader finds Ghosh's fare exotic and hence laudable, then it is not a credit to the novelist, it is a credit to the river-fog that separates the banks.

❑



"It Happened To a Friend of a Friend": Urban Legends in Contemporary Mizo Society

Cherrie Lalnunziri Chhangte

Folklore is defined as 'the body of verbal expressive culture, including tales, legends, oral history, proverbs, jokes, and popular beliefs current among a particular population, comprising the oral tradition of that culture, subculture, or group.'[1] The academic and usually ethnographic study of folklore is known as folkloristics.

The concept of folklore developed as part of the 19th century ideology of romantic nationalism, leading to the reshaping of oral traditions to serve modern ideological goals; only in the 20th century did ethnographers begin to attempt to record folklore without overt political goals. While folklore can contain religious or mythic elements, it typically concerns itself with the mundane traditions of everyday life. Folklore frequently ties the practical and the esoteric into one narrative package. It has often been conflated with mythology, and vice versa, because it has been assumed that any figurative story that does not pertain to the dominant beliefs of the time is not of the same status as those dominant beliefs. Thus, Roman religion is called "myth" by Christians. In that way, "both myth and folklore have become catch-all terms for all figurative narratives which do not correspond with the dominant belief structure."[2] Sometimes "folklore" is religious in nature, like the tales of the Welsh *Mabinogion* or those found in Icelandic skaldic poetry. Many of the tales in the *Golden Legend* of Jacob de Voragine also embody folklore elements in a Christian context: examples of such Christian mythology are the themes woven round Saint George or Saint Christopher. In this case, the term "folklore" is being used in a pejorative sense. That is, while the tales of Odin the

Wanderer have a religious value to the Norse who composed the stories, because it does not fit into a Christian configuration it is not considered "religious" by Christians who may instead refer to it as "folklore."

On the other hand, folklore can be used to accurately describe a figurative narrative, which has no sacred or religious content. In the Jungian view, which is but one method of analysis, it may instead pertain to unconscious psychological patterns, instincts or archetypes of the mind. This lore may or may not have components of the fantastic (such as magic, ethereal beings or the personification of inanimate objects). These folktales may or may not emerge from a religious tradition, but nevertheless speak to deep psychological issues. There can be both a moral and psychological scope to the work, as well as entertainment value, depending upon the nature of the teller, the style of the telling, the ages of the audience members, and the overall context of the performance. Folklorists generally resist universal interpretations of narratives and, wherever possible, analyze oral versions of tellings in specific contexts, rather than print sources, which often show the work or bias of the writer or editor.

A common contemporary folklore is the urban legend, which this paper will primarily focus on. Urban legends are a "kind of folklore consisting of stories often thought to be factual by those circulating them. The term is often used with a meaning similar to the expression "apocryphal story." Urban legends are not necessarily untrue, but they are often false, distorted, exaggerated, or sensationalized. Despite the name, urban legends do not necessarily take place in an urban setting. The name is designed to differentiate them from traditional folklore created in preindustrial times."[3]

Urban legends are sometimes repeated in news stories and, in recent years, distributed by e-mail. People frequently say such tales happened to a "friend of a friend"—so often, in fact, that "friend of a friend", or "FOAF", has become a commonly used term for this sort of story. In the UK, urban legends are sometimes referred to as WTSes (Whale Tumour Stories), from a famous World War II story about whale meat. Similarly, but this time based on a story about monkey meat, the Dutch came to their name for urban legends—they call them *"broodjeaapverhalen"* (i.e. monkey sandwich stories).

Some urban legends have survived a very long time, evolving only slightly over the years, as in the case of the story of a woman killed by spiders nesting in her elaborate hairdo. Others are new and reflect modern circumstances, like the story of people being anaesthetized and waking up minus a kidney surgically removed for transplant. Urban legends often are "born of fears and insecurities, or specifically designed to prey

on such concerns."[4] It is significant that fears and insecurities often play a large part in the formulation of urban legends. In this sense they reflect the anxieties and preoccupations of the society in which they prevail, thus serving as cultural mirrors of the times.

Origins

Jan Harold Brunvand, professor emeritus of English at the University of Utah in the United States, used the term in print as early as 1979 (in a book review appearing in the *Journal of American Folklore* 92:362). However, even at that time folklorists and others had been writing about "urban legends" for a good while. Brunvand used his collection of legends, *The Vanishing Hitchhiker: American Urban Legends & Their Meanings* to make two points: first, that legends, myths, and folklore do not belong solely to so-called primitive or traditional societies; and second, that one could learn much about urban and modern culture by studying such legends.[5] Brunvand has since published a series of similar books. The field also credits Brunvand as the first to use the term *vector* (after the concept of a biological vector) to describe a person or entity passing along an urban legend. Orality obviously plays an important role in the spreading of these legends since most of these are passed on by word-of-mouth.

Structure

Most urban legends are framed as stories, with plots and characters. The urban legends resemble a proper joke, especially in the manner of transmission, only that they are much darker in tone and theme.

The compelling nature of the story and its elements of mystery, horror, fear, or humor are part of what makes the tales so attractive. Many of these legends are presented as warnings or cautionary tales. Other urban legends might better be called "widely dispersed misinformation," such as the erroneous belief that you will automatically pass all of your college courses in a semester if your roommate kills himself. While such "facts" may not have the narrative elements of traditional legend, they are passed from person to person and generally have the elements of horror, humor or caution found in legends.Urban legends also concern unexplained phenomena, like phantom apparitions.

The Mizo Context

In contemporary times, the Mizos, generally speaking, are not very superstitious, largely as a result of the influence of Christianity, which has done away with many of the beliefs that existed in the pre-Christian era. However, like any other community, the Mizo community is also rife with its own share of urban legends, although the extent of the impact that such legends have on the people may vary according to the environment, educational background, and social and economic standing of the listener.Examples of such beliefs still persistent today in rural as well as urban settings are, the belief that an accident may befall members of a family if they embark on a journey in opposite directions (like north and south) on the same day from the same house; that it is bad luck to have a wedding in the months of July and August (which is strictly observed to this day), and so on. Another legend is that of the cat with horns that resides in Phawngpui mountain; it is purpotedly fatal to lay mortal eyes on the creature, but nobody has seen it yet! Urban legends that emerged in Mizo society some time after the First World War are of a lighter vein. Mizo men numbering approximately 2000, were recruited in the French army as part of the Allied Forces to help fight the Germans. They were known as the Lushai Labour Company Nos. 26,27,28,29, and they were mainly employed in menial jobs as cooks, cleaners and coolies.[5] However, upon their return, these men gave glowing reports of their heroism against the Germans in the battlefield, and were hailed as heroes by the community, who swallowed everything they said. Later on, of course, it was common knowledge that most of these 'heroes' never even went near the battlefield, let alone perform heroic exploits agaisnt the Germans. Yet, with the full knowledge that these tales were fabricated, their stories continue to be passed on. Songs were composed in the traditional tune commemorating their exploits, and to this day some of these songs are sung even in urban areas whenever there is a festival or a celebration involving the community. Here is a verse from one such song, entitled *German Ral Run* (The Storming of the German Troops);

Sikimanding Sap i lungmawl e, i lungmawl e,
German Rallian tawnin tir sub ka lungdi, chheih
Ka suihlung leng tur bi dawn ve la.

(Second Commanding Officer, you are thoughtless, O
so thoughtless,

Do not send my Beloved to face the huge German troops,
Think of the loneliness I will have to endure).

The last verse is sung by the hero:

Ka Di tap maiin mi ring lo la, mi ring lo la,
German rallian kulhpui kan ban tawn ni chuan e
A surin ngen mu a sur sung sung.

(Do not think I cried tears of terror, My Love,
The day we stormed the German fortress,
Bullets hailed like rain from the skies).

Folklores often tellingly portray the social ethos and preoccupations of a people. The Mizo's love of humour and witty repertoire is seen in the lore that is prevalent in the society. A legendary character that emerged based on World War II tales is that of Rumliana, a non-existent hero who also went to join the French forces; his trademark wit, sarcasm, cunning, physical strength and bravery make him a much beloved and oft-quoted character even in contemporary times. This fictional hero's exploits are told in the form of humorous anecdotes, and tales of his exploits are repeated and exaggerated at every telling. He was supposed to have resisted a dental check-up as part of the physical fitness evaluation prior to his enlistment in the army; he insisted that he would not be fighting the German army with his teeth, and his superiors were at a loss to refute this mixture of stubborn tribal wisdom and cunning. He was supposedly so persuasive and good with words that he was able to procure an extension of his short leave from the Army by stating that the floods prevented his return—and this was at the peak of summer, when there was a drought. Another tale relates of an incident where he was given the task of constructing a house by the British officers. Towards the end, when construction was nearly complete and the officer was inspecting the interior of the house, Rumliana, who was standing upon the roof, started urinating from the top right at the place where his superiors were standing. Needless to say, the officer and his retinue were livid with rage, but Rumliana, in all innocence, blithely protested that this was the Mizo's traditional way of testing whether a new roof would leak or not, leaving the Britishman helpless to do anything by way of remonstration since he did not want to offend local sensibilities.

What characterises Rumliana as an urban legend is that, although he never really did exist, he *could* have been a 'friend of a friend', believable

and made seemingly authentic by his possession of typical Mizo traits; moreover, it is probable that his tales are actually based on real characters and incidents. Not only that, he used his wit and cunning in such a way as to subvert the authority of the British without overtly showing disrespect. Beneath the servility and awe that the white man expected and *did* get, he, like many others, protested to such subjugation in his own subtle way. Perhaps this, and the ability of the Mizo psyche to identify with his sentiments, accounts for his popularity. Similarly, another urban legend that has this kind of believability is the lore of *Tualte vanglai* ('the heydays of Tualte', Tualte being a village in Mizoram). Although the village of Tualte actually exists, none of the accounts of the fame, greatness and notoriety that it supposedly possessed in its heydays, are historically true. Yet, to this day, when anyone wants to give a highly exaggerated or unbelievable story or joke with a twist of authenticity, he refers to it as happening in the *days of Tualte*, though none of what he says is taken seriously. For instance, the joke goes that gooseberry trees in the heydays of Tualte were so fruitful that the neighbouring Mango tree would produce gooseberries too. And from there evolved the adage, 'Nothing but gooseberries come from gosseberry trees', a saying commonly repeated to this day. An interesting belief concerns the *nuthlawi* (pronounced 'nuthloi'). The *nuthlawi* is defined as a woman who is either divorced, and/or is an unmarried or a single mother. The status of such a woman is, perhaps not surprisingly, very low in the society, and her position is associated with shame and stigmatization, a common occurrence in other tribal and non-tribal societies of India. What marks the attitude of the Mizos towards this woman as different is the various myths that are associated with her status. A *nuthlawi*, for instance, is almost equated with the siren/seductress figure which is found so frequently in literature produced by men. She is seen as someone who can deviously manouver her way into various situations and manipulate other people, especially males, by using her seductive charms. She is seen especially as someone who takes advantage of the gullibility and sexual weaknesses of men in order to get her way. She is portrayed as a flamboyant character without many scruples, sexual or otherwise, tougher and more hard-bitten than other women, and much of her success in any field is attributed to her 'lack of shame' more than anything else. In other words, she is believed to be someone who lacks morality and principles; at the same time, perhaps due to this percieved lack of morality, she is also one of the few women who have the courage to follow the desires of the heart, since she does not have anything else to lose, having lost her reputation anyway.

In other words, she becomes a larger-than-life figure, a legend,

albiet in a very negative sense. She is seen as someone who can do things that a 'normal' woman would be unable to do; someone who can beguile, enchant and dupe even men who are normally considered practical and level-headed. She is a figure of fascination, the one who simultaneously attracts and repels, representing danger, taboo, and temptation. She is the one who tends to get blamed if anything goes wrong within the social structure that she lives in. Paradoxically, at an individual level, she may receive sympathy because the *nuthlawi* is very often a close relative or friend, or at the very least, a friend of a friend, in such a close-knit tribal society as the Mizo's.

Ironically, with the impact of modernization, there is a significant leap in the divorce rates and families are breaking up in alarmingly large numbers especially in urban areas. An increase in broken families automatically translates into an increase in the number of such women, and the prevalent attitude towards such women is highly detrimental to their psychological, and emotional wellbeing as a result of the mythologizing tendencies of the society, which blows up the *nuthlawi*'s character out of proportion.

Urban legends, thus, may have extremely far-reaching effects since such attitudes may hamper the balanced judgement of a society; a woman is instantly transformed into a different person as percieved by the society, attaining almost mythical proportions alien to attributes possessed by 'normal' persons. It may be of considerable interest to the sociologist and the psychologist to delve into the reasons why such a character is seen as a threat to the society, arousing emotions of fear and insecurity, the two basic ingredients that tend to give birth to urban legends. One may wonder if there is a close link between the fear and insecurity engendered by such a woman with the increasing influence of feminist thought in a formerly conservative society that has always functioned on patriarchal lines. Women in tribal societies are no longer as dependent upon the males in the society, especially when there are no rigid class or caste distinctions (as is the case in most North Eastern tribal societies), and many women have evolved into strong, independent individuals living life by their own rules. This new-found independence is perhaps more strongly asserted or emphasized in the divorcee, who neccesarily has to fend for herself in order to survive, since she no longer has a male partner to share the burden with. Whereas the male has traditionally been the head of the house and the decision-maker in the family, bearing the brunt of the family's burdens on his shoulder, of late, the situation is such that his support or presence is no longer as vital to the woman's well-being. This may thus, give rise to a feeling of insecurity and resentment

in the male. The question that arises then, is, have these myths regarding the divorcee or unwed mother been perpetuated by the men in the community? And are women themselves, still largely under patriarchal influence, conditioned to view themselves as such? These and other questions cannot be easily answered and may be a subject for another paper.

The widespread illegal immigration of Myanmarese citizens into Mizoram across the Champhai border has resulted in an influx of foriegners in the State. These immigrants usually seek employment in the domestic circles of the urban areas like Aizawl, Lunglei, Kolasib, Serchhip, etc. Most of the household help, as well as many taxi drivers, are people from these areas. This, in turn, has given rise to a number of new lores, again, arising from a mixture of fear, suspicion and insecurity, the added ingredient being that these tales are believable because there is a high probability that they may contain some truth. Such tales include the belief that housemaids give cough syrup and other relaxants to the infants they babysit in order not to be disturbed by them; that all of these workers are potential thieves waiting to gain the trust of their employers before robbing them blind; that there is a network between the women who double as sex workers, and taxi drivers, who act as their pimps; and that there are often severed body parts (like fingers) in the canned food imported from Myanmar, and so on.

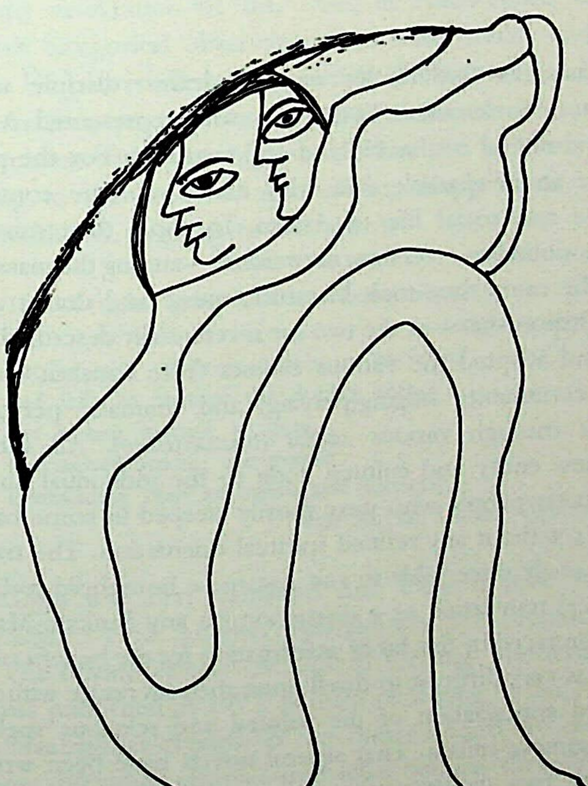
Although a majority of traditional beliefs and sayings are no longer in use in contemporary urban settings, some have survived. A man whose wife is pregnant still baulks at the thought of killing any animal, domestic or otherwise, lest something undesirable (usually a physical deformity) happens to the unborn child. Folklore is often didactic in nature, and such sayings as 'it is never too late to have the misfortune of aquiring a physical deformity' is a saying that has been and continues to be passed on, perhaps originally an attempt to discourage people who mock those who are physically challenged. Other sayings are of a demeaning nature to women, like 'women and crabs do not have any religion', 'dogs and women give their affection to whoever lavishes attention on them', 'fences and women are replaceable', and so on. Although these sayings are not really vocalised nowadays, it is a different question altogether as to whether such an attitude towards women is still prevalent. Other sayings concern characteristics that some of the sub-tribes/clans have. For instance, the Raltes are traditionally described as an extremely noisy group, Pachuau and Sailo as stubborn, Chhangte men are considered henpecked, and so on. Again, these sayings, although not attributed as having too much truth in them, are still very prevalent.

The erroneous belief that Mizos have emerged from a big rock called 'Chhinlung' in olden times is a lore that has influenced and impacted many of our folktales. Although such a belief is considered to be false and without basis, Mizos, as a figure of speech, still often describe themselves as 'Chhinlung Chhuak' or, 'emerging from Chhinlung'. The belief that no celebration is complete without the traditional drum (*khuang*) is one that continues to have an impact in modern times. Despite the modernization of the Church *vis a vis* the musical instruments used in worship, no church is complete without the presence of the drum. It is interesting to note that spirituality and church revivals are intensely linked with the drumbeats in the Mizo church. Any church revival worth its salt is never without dancing, which is accompanied by the rhythmic and almost ritualistic beats of the drum. Here, one may venture to draw a comparison with the role of drums in African tribal communities, where drums played such a major role that they continued to be used to relay information during slave uprisings. This, in fact, resulted in the banning of drums in America during the 1700s and 1800s.[6] Similar to the African context, the *khuang* (drum) plays an important role in the Mizo society, acting as a transmitter of the cultural and religious experiences of the people.

In conclusion, one may say that despite the changing paradigms that tribal societies have undergone as a result of modernization, westernization, and urbanization, tribal societies like the Mizos still do retain elements of folklore and folk culture in their everday beliefs. Christianity has had a huge impact on the society, bringing with it literacy, education and development in various areas, and significantly minimising the influence of traditional belief systems. Much of the beliefs and practices of old are viewed with a certain amount of scepticism by the younger generation, especially with the increasing exposure to western ways via the media explosion. Yet, such a society in transition is unique in that the old and new belief systems are able to exist side by side. In this age of widespread literacy, rapid mass communication and travel, it is only natural that new legends will evolve and become popular. Chain letters, anonymous emails and endless SMS jokes are passed on and in a short span of time, new lores are easily born. Traditionally steeped in myths, legends and folktales, it is perhaps not surprising that, along with the old beliefs, new legends continue to develop in contemporary times, legends and lores that are unique to the urban lifestyle, enriching the corpus of existing lores and bringing a fresh insight into the evolution of the modern tribal society.

Notes

1. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/folklore. 18 July 2006.
2. ibid.
3. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/urbanlegends. 18 July 2006.
4. ibid.
5. Brunvand, Jan Harold. The Vanishing Hitchhiker: American Urban Legends And Their Meanings. (New York: Norton, 2003). p.2.
6. Walton, Ortiz. *Music: Black, White & Blue.* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1972). p.20.



The Divine Verses by Saroj Kumar Dutta, Vision Publications, Tinsukia (Assam) 1997, Pp. 179+vi, Rs.200/-
Naamghosa Hymns To The Blessed Lord by Pranabananda Pathak, Promilla & Co Publishers in association with Bibliophile South Asia, New Delhi 2005, Pp.243, Rs.495/-

Sri Madhavadeva (1489-1596) was the dearest disciple and associate of Srimanta Sankaradeva(1449-1568) who represented Assam in the neo-Vaisnavic revival in the 15th and 16th centuries. For the posterity, the two became an inseparable duo who made supreme contributions to the literature and social life of Assam. In short their mission was to propagate monotheism—*eksarana naamdharma*—among the masses in Assam. To realize the same they took literature, music and drama as the tools. The two mahapurushas—as the two are reverentially described in Assam—translated and adapted the various classics from Sanskrit and organized recitations, community singing(praying) and dramatic performances of those works through various *sattras* (monasteries). All these gave an altogether new entity and cultural code to the individual and social life of the Assamese people who were mostly steeped in some base practices in those days without any refined spiritual orientation. The tradition lived on and it is easily discernible in any Assamese household today. A review of *Naamghosa's* translation or a discussion on any Sankara-Madhava topic needs to be prefaced by this bit of information for the benefit of uninitiated readers as it is very difficult to dwell upon their literature without a careful and reasoned appreciation of the cultural and religious spell they have over the Assamese milieu. That several novels have been written on the lives of these two mahapurushas by front ranking names of assamese fiction—three on Madhavadeva alone— is one indicator of their influence on the Assamese life.

Naamghosa, comprising a thousand verses, is the poetical expression of Madhavadeva's spiritual quest. Of the thousand verses, a few hundred (four hundred, according to Maheswar Neog and six hundred, according to Satyendranath Sharma) are translations from various Puranas, the rest

are his own. The Assamese Vaisnavic literature was largely guided by a principle as pronounced in Shankaradeva's advice to Madhavadeva— "it is better to retain the original tone". Maheswar Neog observes that this allegiance at times created an obstruction in expressing the self. But he also adds that in *Naam-Ghosa*, Madhavadeva overcomes that hindrance. Banikanta Kakoti, a giant of twentieth century Assamese language and literature, refers to this work as confluence of three tempers that flows to the sea of sacred joy— a respectful glorification of the path shown by Sankaradeva, Madhavadeva's surrender to the Almighty and the greatness of Krshna Bhakti. To quote Banikanta Kakoti "This soulful Bhakti oozing off his (Madhavadeva) heart raises *Naam-Ghosa* from being another didactic anthology of verses and places it amongst the best works of literature with a healthy celebration of life." Yes, in *Naam-Ghosa*, one discerns Madhavadeva's categorical observations on some trends and tendencies of his times. He powerfully advocates that the 'naamdharma' as defined by Sri Sankaradeva, reaches out to people from various walks of life. He also dismisses with unambiguous disdain the trick of those, who, without going to the depth of spiritualism, simply treats religion as a means of livelihood feigning to be 'guru's.

> The so called guru does not know what the scriptures say,
> but he says whatever comes on his mind
> and fails to remove the doubts withal.
> Yet styling himself as guru
> He moves among the people
> Demanding their reverence and services.
> (verse-55,The Divine Verses)

The *Naam-Ghosa* was first translated into English (also to Hindi) by Haramohan Das in 1955. Another translation by Soroj Kumar Dutta with the title — The Divine Verses—A book of Oriental Mysticism in Popular Idiom' — was published in 1997. A third rendering by Sri Pranabananda Pathak — 'Naamghosa-Hymns to the Blessed Lord' — was published in 2005. These individual efforts—individual because these translators did not enjoy any institutional support in carrying out the challenging work of translating the *Naam-Ghosa*—would definitely contribute in bringing Sankara-Madhava to its rightful place in the all-India literary dialogue. And that entails the translators huge responsibility. After all in translating a work like Naam Ghosa, one has to be careful about its religious significance and the tone of the diction used by the original poet. Soroj

Kumar Dutta and the persons behind the publication (the book was published posthumously) of his 'Divine Verses' appeared to be aware about the challenge. A concise but very appropriate introduction by eminent scholar Mukunda Madhava Sharma and a kind foreword by the then President Dr Shankar Dayal Sharma adds to the library value of the book. Readers uninitiated to the Vaisnavic literature would be helped by the glossary at the end. Coming a decade later, Pathak's translation was supposed to be a more wholesome effort. However, it appears that he was led more by enthusiasm than the home work necessary in carrying out such a work. And this is admitted in his introduction in all innocence.

Prof Dutta takes care to maintain the dignified tone in choice of vocabulary in a fairly unpretentious way. This reviewer met him almost daily in the late eighties of the last century as colleagues in the same college when he started this work and therefore is aware about the care, caution and labour behind it. Let us take just one example.

> Having gained the rare human frame,
> Lay aside your desire for worldliness
> Befitting the brute..
> And instead, sitting in the company of the virtuous
> And singing the glories of Hari,
> Drink that nectar with contentment,
>
> (verse 27, The Divine Verses)
> (Madhavadeva's source-Bhagavad Purana-11.9.29)

The language obviously does not adequately indicate the matchless poetry of Madhavadeva. But at least the readers can make an idea of the philosophy and the masterful efforts of the two mahapurushas in propagating the same that has become the sustaining spirit of the moral fabric and aesthetic entity of the Assamese society for over five centuries. Now compare that with the version of Pathak—

> O unique human life,
> Abandon the life of a material nature.
> Sing the Lord's praise with hymns,
> Sweeter than milk and honey,
> With all noble company.

Such a diction is unlikely to 'make the present English educated young generation of Assam in particular and also the people living in the rest of the country aware of the essence of devotion towards God given to us by Madhavadeva that Pathak expects in the preface in all humility.

We also see that Dutta is not using capitals in starting every line. He was aware that he was not making a poetical rendering in English. Besides, he has not translated the headings of different cantos. Probably he was guided by two factors. First, for a modern readership, those are not necessary, and secondly, their rendering in English would appear too literal. It is ironic that Pathak's attempt to do so proved the second apprehension correct. After all picture for *chabi*, 'advice' for *upadesha* and 'determination of God' for *Ishwar nirnoy* are never the acceptable words in a book like *Naam-Ghosa*.

At times Pathak's translation deviates from the original meaning. Take the following for example

> Thy name is the essence of all scriptures
> O Lord,
> Thy name Rama, Krsna, Hari is the supreme religion.
> He whose tongue never forsakes the Lord's name,
> Attains salvation with all ease.
> Therefore wait not to attain salvation,
> Attain the same by singing this name (verse-23)

Readers who read the original would agree that Dutta gets the meaning much nearer to the source—

> The name of Rama Krisna Hari is the highest religion
>
> being the essence of all the Vedic thoughts.
> Verily, there is no religion beyond it.
> Then, without recollecting that name
> by what other means
> are you going to cross the world.

In certain verses however, the difference between the two translations is insignificant. For example—

> O Supreme Lord
> Thou art possessor of the world,
> Thou art the saviour of the fallen
> Verily, thou art beginningless and endless
> (verse-787, Dutta)

And,

> O Lord of the Universe,
> Thou art the destiny of the sinner.
> O Lord, Thou art the saviour of the sinner;
> Thou art the supreme personality of the Godhead;

Thou art beginningless, endless,
(verse 787, Pathak)

True, translation, especially literary translation, is a tricky exercise with the risk of being 'too literal' on the one hand and being 'infidel' on the other. Readers would take the minor deviations as a gift of translation if the language is eminently readable. Otherwise a sincere adherence to the original text's meaning would earn their appreciation. But if a work does not satisfy either way, then the purpose fails. Dutta chose the second option and thus his work is expected to serve a library purpose to some extent.

The academia in Assam is yet to arrive at a consensus regarding English spelling of Assamese words. And that is noticeable in these two works. Pathak's 'Krsna' is Dutta's 'Krisna'. And though both of them wrote 'Naamghosa', /sa/ for the last phoneme is not beyond question.

In spite of comparative inadequacies, these efforts should provoke the academia to organize the Sankara-Madhava studies in a more productive and methodical manner and arrange for more wholesome and purposeful translation of their works. It is a task long overdue. Let us not forget what Madhavadeva said in his *Naamghosa*—

The debased find faults alone/
and the moderates scan both vice and virtues
and the lofty discover virtues in everything,
while the excellent enlarge even the least of virtues.
(verse 120, The Divine Verses)

Amrit Jyoti Mahanta

And Where, My Friend, Lay You Hiding by Ananda Mukerji, Harper Collins, 2006, Pp.263, Rs.295/-

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Eminently and even compulsively readable, Ananda Mukerji's book seeks to explore the fountainhead of human creativity. Obsessed with his art a writer abandons his wife, his children, his circle of devoted friends, and disappears into a Bombay slum, in the underprivileged environs of which he draws inspiration for a new crop of highly acclaimed works. This sort of extreme devotion to one's creative instinct is an intriguing

premise, one that most of us might consider implausible and to a certain extent destructive. But if art is indeed the outcome of an extremely selfish and personal effort, then it is easy to grasp, why the artist has to take pains in moulding himself through varied experiences, all in hope that his new avatar will take his creativity to a new high.

The novel begins with a train journey, during which there is a chance encounter between the Shanjoy and Anjani Prasad. As individuals both of them could not be more different; Shanjoy is the English-speaking son of a well-to-do-Bengali family, whereas Anjani is a small town dweller with rustic manners honed out of a very traditional upbringing. After their first meeting, it does not take much time for them to discover that they share a common love for books and writing. An easy friendship develops between them and they interact frequently and try to best each other's writing efforts. Between the two friends it is Shanjoy, who is more judgemental, he never fails to criticize his friend whenever an opportunity presents itself.

In fact the first sentence, with which the book begins, "He was a man of easy fidelity," constitutes the first in a series of judgements that Shanjoy would pass on Anjani. There is a degree of jealousy in Shanjoy's attitude, for he is constantly plagued by the notion that he might not be as good a writer as Anjani is. Anjani has no such fears. He is so obsessed with the stories he is writing that he does not care about how he compares to Shanjoy or anyone else. Anjani represents the epitome of selfishness. He will pursue his writing at any cost to himself and, to his family and his friends. When the two friends get married, it is Anjani who is able to build a happy relationship with his wife, unlike Shanjoy whose relations with his own wife go downhill from the very initial days of their marriage.

But a loving and caring wife, a comfortable home, mean very little to Anjani, who thinks that self-inflicted misfortunes might act as a catalyst to inspire a new zeal into his writing. One day he abruptly leaves his home to disappear into a Bombay slum, in the fetid labyrinths of which he would spend rest of his life questing for new stories to write. In his mad zeal he punishes not only himself, but also his family, who are all traumatized by his inexplicable disappearance. But the pain he is causing does not bother Anjani, he is a driven man who cares only about his long periods of creative work, followed by bouts of heavy drinking and outbursts of savage sexual conquest. He breaks all contact with his family, and does not even care to inform them where or how he lives in Bombay.

Shanjoy takes it upon himself to trace his friend, but that is no easy feat, for Anjani has no desire to meet people from the idyllic past that he has left for good. It is Shanjoy's long search for his friend that seems to have gone into inspiring the novel's title, "And Where, My Friend, Lay You Hiding". When Shanjoy manages to find his friend, he fails to comprehend what sort of inspiration Anjani could possibly get from living in a decrepit slum. In his reply, Anjani describes his new inspirers as,

> Human beings–all sorts of them, stripped of pretensions. From crooks to good people. Raw human nature. Where else will you get them? On Malabar Hill? Where the most cultivated pretenders of this city hide behind a tie and a stripped shirt?

The bizarre and uncompromising callousness with which Anjani tramples over his own needs and that of his own family is difficult to digest.

The novel is an interesting foray into the mind of a person obsessed by his own creativity, though it has to be said that the plot does evoke a strong sense of *déjà vu*. Somerset Maugham's brilliant novel *The Moon and the Sixpence* revolves around a theme that is almost a mirror image of the book under review. In *Moon and the Sixpence*, it is Charles Strickland who walks out on his family, in order to spend rest of his life painting. Strickland travels from Europe to Tahiti where he paints some of his best painting works, correspondingly Anjani Prasad's travels from Mirapur in Uttar Pradesh to a Bombay slum, where he finds his artistic vision and is able to write some of his best stories.

All the minor drawings in both the books are extremely effective, and the simplicity of the narratives is as notable. But whereas Maugham's narrative was lot more focused on the travails of Strickland, Ananda Mukerji's book suffers from frequent digression into areas that have little to do with the primary theme.

Anoop Verma

The Train That Had Wings: Selected Short Stories of M. Mukundan, tr., Donald R. Davis. Jr., The University of Michigan: Ann Arbor. 2005. Pp 135.

Short fiction has always maintained a unique standing in modern Malayalam literature. Over the decades, the practitioners of this form have experimented with content and form like none else, and have related to the literary sensibilities of various generations of Malayali readers in a fundamentally interactive mode. During the late fifties and sixties of the last century, the Western existentialists and South American revolutionary writers impelled Malayali fiction writers on a compelling exploration of the inner man set against the outer world. It is also significant that many of these writers had left Kerala and were living and travelling in big cities like Delhi and Mumbai. Their expatriate experience also became an impetus for them to negotiate their parochial bonds by creating an almost tragic literary idiom that reflected the irrationality of set identities. While most of them had very critical views of the romanticised socio-centric aesthetics of the Progressives, some were also provoked by the sprouting Leftist dream of liberation and were eager to assimilate the western modernist's angst about the grand narrative. With exceptions like M.T. Vasudevan Nair, V.K.N, and Madhavikutty (Kamala Sorayya) who found their own niches in the literature, a new breed of writers such as Anand, O.V. Vijayan, Kakkanadan and M.Mukundan thus began determining the modernist mainstream course of Malayalam fiction from their residences outside their homeland.

M. Mukundan (b.1942) is well-known for his engaging portrayal of life in the culturally diverse small former French colony of Mahe. But one can readily see that the Indian locales and coordinates in his works are only a backdrop for his perpetual themes of anomie, captivity, freedom etc., derived from an intellectual involvement with those from Sartre to Che Guevera. Mukundan's enduring concern has been the gloomy middle ground of compromised humanity that modern man is heir to. His own experience of living outside Kerala as a diplomat in the French Embassy in Delhi, also helped him fictionalize events and situations that spell out – to quote his translator Donald R. Davis Jr. – his "vision of modernity as cosmopolitanism" wherein his characters are dreadfully united in their experiences of loss of identity, institutional repression, malicious libido, and emotional estrangement." It is this cosmopolitan apprehension pervading Mukundan's stories that captures a Western translator's interest.

The collection titled *The Train that Had Wings* which contains Donald R. Davis Jr's translation of Mukundan's sixteen selected short stories could indeed be seen as revolving around the central universal theme of freedom, which is considered in relation with other aspects of existence like confinement, responsibility, loneliness, etc. For instance, the concept of liberation is examined in relation with anonymity in the story, "Radha, Just Radha", where the lead character finds that her familiar world no longer recognizes her. Her bewilderment verges on madness, either hers or the outer world's. The haunting concern here is the dialectic of freedom/absurdity inherent in human life and the dread of apprehending one or the other as true at an unexpected moment. The notion of familiarity is re-examined in "Tea", which presents a very common family situation where an aged father finds the presence of his helpful kin as bondage, and chooses to shut himself out in his loneliness, an act which paradoxically transforms itself into an exercise in freedom. "Bathroom", on the other hand, demystifies all sanctity accorded to man's subjective perception of freedom by throwing Purushottaman, its protagonist – who had miraculously actualized his free will by turning into a fly – into a strange and unforeseen situation that claims his life in a flash. The bizarre element in the metamorphosis of Purushottaman gains the dimension of the primordial in "Breast Milk" where a child who is denied his instinctual choices finds them in the animal world.

The sense of futility of the quest and its concomitant frustrations lead Mukundan's characters into a denial of existent social and moral values, and very often end them up in a confrontation with death. The march unto death in Mukundan's stories present three different ways in which modern man encounters fatality: as a victim, as an agent, as a witness.

Jayan, the little boy in "Five-and–a Half-year Old", the couple in "They Are Singing", and the protagonist and his prostitute in "O Prostitutes, A Temple For You" are driven by an inner force—"I'll go by myself from here" (Five-and–a Half-year Old); "Let's die. Let's die. Let's die." ("They Are Singing"), "Come." The River called. Holding the hand of a prostitute, he entered the water" (O Prostitutes, A Temple For You) – which make them walk into death as willing agents of self-annihilation, which represents for them the dream of freedom. Even in the title story "The Train That Had Wings" the hero and his wife prepare to walk into "Delhi filled with sepulchers": "Let us go then."

The double-edged story "I, the Scavenger" shares paradigmatic connections with the first story of the collection, "Office" as with another story, "Tonsured Life". These three may be called *bond stories* where the

protagonists are held captive by their work. "Office" shows how a potentially empathic human being is caught in the routine of his work and reduced to a near automaton. The nameless protagonist of the story, who is referred to as the inclusive pronoun 'he', becomes a prototype of captivity in a rapidly moving world. The irony lies in the fact that all his fast and methodical work cannot earn him even one moment of spontaneity. In "I, the Scavenger" the given job of a scavenger is at once an explicit token of respectability and an implicit sign of victimization for the hero. In this reversal of the traditional literary treatment of the occupation where the scavengers themselves view their job as mean and disgraceful, and attempt to escape it, Mukundan duly accords it the dignity of labour, and brings the focus to other hidden areas of repression as seen in the hero's gradual and inescapable identification with the ambience of his job, and in his unwitting indebtedness to an external agent who controls his entire life and even leads him to his grave. In "Tonsured Life" we see the lead character being called out of one form of captivity into another. He is led out of his office by a certain Lakshmanlal Pyarilal Panditji through a surrealistic journey that ends in his being spat in the face by the Pandit for performing a simple act of compassion. In all these three stories, the characters are involuntary victims of the establishment that curbs their existential freedom of choice. In "River and Boat", too, it is the external societal agents that send off Bhaskaran to an uncertain voyage. The questions at the end of the story are poignant: "Would he reach the other shore? Would he return?"

Two powerful stories of the collection present the narrative voices as witnesses to death. "Delhi 1981" present two eye witnesses of a violent assault and rape as the representatives of the entire Indian people who have a passive or, worse, secretly encouraging attitude towards violence; Rajinder Pande and Kishore Lal watching the brutal scene down from their top floor are almost cheerleaders at a gallery—witnessing and applauding mindlessly. In a different approach to witnessing, "Piss" presents the narrator who follows a moneylender, Kumaran Nayar, and happens to watch the latter, in a fit of rage, pissing on the pyre of a man who died without paying his money back. Incensed by this horrific scene, the narrator himself loses control and kills Kumaran Nayar with a stone. In this bizarre episode of the witness turning into an agent of death, Mukundan brings home to us a critique of the repulsive witnessing as in "Delhi 1981". Here, choosing to kill the loathsome *other* is seen as a way to release as different from the stories that see self-destruction as freedom.

"Parrots" and "The Seventh Flower" are two stories in the collection that find their means of negotiating the obstacles in the path to freedom. The gentleman in "Parrots" brings himself to free the caged parrots that obviously symbolize modern man's mechanical, monotonous lifestyle. In "The Seventh Flower," the heroine equates freedom with unquestioning trust. She seems to have set out on a quest for such absolute trust with the touchstone of a seeming fantasy, which she holds to be true, and finally finds a liberating faith in the man who marries her.

It is admirable that Mukundan weaves a whole lot of fictional narratives around the single theme of freedom, which ultimately become studies of the complex levels of the experience of freedom in man's inner and outer worlds. By selecting these sixteen stories the translator has been able to give a textual integrity to the collection with the notion of freedom as its core which is aptly reflected in the title "The Train that Had Wings". While these are indeed worthy of approbation, one cannot altogether overlook the thematic and formalistic limitation of Mukundan's fiction. The deft craft and variety of the narrative hardly make good the lack of creative innovation. In a sense, Mukundan's narrative can be seen as a modernist cosmopolitan makeover of what M.T. Vasudevan Nair does within a neighbourhood frame. While this fitted perfectly into the general literary environs of the 1960s, one has to realize that today's fiction the world over has come a long way from there, and it is indispensable that our writers at least keep up with the times, if not set its pace.

Donald R. Davis Jr.'s translation is by and large fluent, but he has not quite grasped the nuances of colloquial Malayalam as is evident in some of the translated passages. For instance, in "I, the Scavenger" the conversational usage of language is overlooked and word to word rendition of phrases are given in many a place, thus resulting in phrasal awkwardness: ridiculous expressions like 'hop a thieves train', the literal translation of '*kalla vanti kayaruka*' which means 'take a train without travel document'; calling local vendors 'businessmen'; referring to a teenage girl as a 'ten-or-fifteen year old' while the English language does not have an equivalent idiomatic expression for the Malayalam '*pathu-pathinanchu vayassu*' which means 'around fifteen years of age'. Surprisingly, there are a few places of inexplicable idiomatic and grammatical clumsiness, too: 'She climbed into the queen's grave and lied down' ("They are Singing"), 'Standing and standing, his feet ached' ("Office"), "When I recall that I am able to wear that same uniform..." "He was a drinker." ("I, the Scavenger").

Barring these slip-ups and a general proclivity towards literal translation

at the cost of linguistic elegance, the collection is produced excellently with a detailed and insightful introduction by the translator. It would be heartening to see more of such translations of regional Indian language texts.

Rizio Yohannan Raj

Exploring Shakespeare: The Dynamics of Playmaking by S. Viswanathan, Hyderabad, Orient Longman, 2005, Pp.286. Rs. 400/-

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The enchantment of the Bard of Avon shows no sign of waning. New productions, both traditional and experimental continue to be staged around the world; filmic adaptations of his plays are being made emphasizing their universal appeal; his plays are being re-assessed on the page and the stage by researchers, performers, and critics. Historical and textual controversies regarding his work and life still invigorate critical discussions.[1] Nearly four hundred years after his death, Shakespeare's work is more accessible, and more relevant, than ever.

William Shakespeare has a special niche in India. T.B. Macaulay's recommendation of teaching English language and canonical literature to all British subjects may have installed the British writers in the Indian education system; but the reason for their presence in the post-Independence scenario is because they have claimed a place in the Indian heart. Of all the English writers, the impact of Shakespeare must be the most pervasive and enduring.[2] The intrinsic expressiveness of his works keeps drawing people back to them. Their appeal is trans-generational. Scenes from his plays, if not the entire plays, introduce Indian schoolchildren to the effect of greed, avarice, ambition and disloyalty in human affairs; the university students and research scholars continue to grapple with the kaleidoscopic range of his genius and have neither fathomed the depths of the human psyche that he has explored nor scaled the superlative heights of his poetic imagination.

Considering the dearth of performance orientation in most educational institutions, the general trend of Shakespeare studies as a component of an orthodox syllabus has been literary. The plays are usually 'read' like novels and discussed in terms of themes, characters, imagery and so on. Occasionally a few enterprising teachers try to introduce the 'dramatic'

element by collaborative reading methods. But generally, the tendency is to disregard or forget that Shakespeare was as much a product of the Elizabethan social and political forces as of its theatre of dialectical conflicts and hence his plays reflect the processes of "collective negotiation and exchange"[3] of their historical context, capable of conveying something meaningful to contemporary audiences.

A new addition to the list of must-read books on Shakespeare is S. Viswanathan's *Exploring Shakespeare: The Dynamics of Playmaking* that combines analyses of particular plays and the institutions, in education and theatre, which have been built around them. The twenty-one essays of the volume were written at different times and published separately. Since they explore "different devices or certain generally less noticed processes" of Shakespearean dramaturgy, Viswanathan has wisely brought them together under a common rubric to explain the strategy of Shakespeare's "dramatico-theatrical communication" (ix, xii). In the brief Introduction to the book, the author explains, "These processes, often participating as they do both in the formation and structural movement of the plays and in their actual theatrical dynamics…supply part of the driving energy behind the dynamics of the plays" (xii). Taken together, the devices/processes represent two significant modes deployed brilliantly by the dramatist for theatrical expressiveness. One mode is described as the "exploratory-creative" mode used by Shakespeare, which makes optimum use of the resources of language and expression, as constituents of his perception and conception, enabling the embodiment of his poetry as the vehicle of his imaginative creativity. The second mode consists of the operativeness of the devices/processes as signifiers to convey the cultural-political significances of the plays.

The essays are divided into three groups. Section One is titled 'Across the Canon' and carries essays that deal with a particular convention as it operates in a cross-section of plays in the canon. Taken up for discussion are some well-known stock-in-trade devices or tools of the Elizabethan dramatists like the soliloquy, dramatic induction, the play within a play; the use of tropes or conceits like the sleep and death coalescence, metamorphoses [e.g. of Actaeon], movement across the stage as syntagma to indicate paradigmatic dramatic depth; or the use of single-speech characters and/or disappearing characters, and of 'shadows'. It is said that the very architecture of Shakespeare's theatre was emblematic. According to Viswanathan, Shakespeare makes very delicate and subtle use of the older theatrical traditions and invariably extends their parameters to give them deeper and more intense dimensions.

The Section also contains essays offering fascinating analyses of

features like "illeism" [when the dramatist makes a character speaking in the first person, refer to himself in the third person "not simply as 'he', which would be illeism proper, a traditional grammatical mode, but by a name" (4) for a specific purpose]; the scene within a scene [as different from the play within a play device]; and the creation of poetic illusion with the device of 'inset'. The author claims that Shakespeare effectively exploits the complexities of dramatic illusion, especially "the 'multiconsciousness' of the Elizabethan audience and the part played by it in the interesting ambivalences of the process of dramatic illusion" (17) for maximum dramatic impact.

The essays in Section Two address the operativeness of a particular process or phenomenon in a particular play, as for instance the correlation between visualization and 'visuality' in *Hamlet*, the multiple connotations of 'question' in *Hamlet*, the uses of 'topoi' in *Coriolanus*, theatricality and mimesis in *Anthony and Cleopatra* and *The Winter's Tale*. Shakespeare's genius is such that he can take a numinous reality and orchestrate its many modes so that all responses to it can transfigure together. To achieve this, the instrument that he uses is language—specifically, language in performance.

Viswanathan's accentuation of certain inherent features of the 16th and 17th century British drama as intrinsically performative, alters from the very beginning the assumptions on which many traditional kinds of analyses are based. His is the kind of study that focuses upon and incorporates the essential aspect of Shakespeare's work, its theatricality. He illustrates the extraordinary range and diversity in the use of the devices and processes by the dramatist nonpareil that releases the subtextual and subliminal energies in the plays. The essays in the two sections demonstrate not only a comprehensive and thorough knowledge of the plays but a critical acumen of a high order. Viswanathan's discussion connects without strain to earlier scholarship and extends the debates in insightful and relevant ways.

Section Three titled 'Intercultural Perspectives' presents a crossover or a comparative approach that uses the lens of Sanskrit and Indian dramatic conventions to study some of the Shakespearean play practices. The attempt to apply principles of Sanskrit dramaturgy to Shakespeare's plays—as for instance, *dhvani* to *Macbeth*; the use of 'dream' as dramatic device in Shakespeare and Bhasa; the effects of *trompe l'oeil* in the plays of Shakespeare, Bhasa and Kalidasa—is both commendable and heuristic. The comparisons are not 'yoked with violence together' but present with an edge of challenge fascinating explorations of the aesthetics of performance of two vastly different cultural and social contexts.

Tutun Mukherjee /

Written in a lucid and an engaging style, this is a useful volume which contributes significantly to Shakespeare scholarship. In keeping with the Bard's own attitude, the value of the book lies in its pragmatic approach. It calls the 'spectator' into the Shakespearean theatre to recover some structures and devices that could suggest ways to explore and understand the dynamics of the dramatist's prodigious creative realm. The analyses do not impair but add to the pleasure of returning to Shakespeare.

Notes

1 Much has been written about Shakespeare yet he remains sphinx-like. A recent biography, *Will in the World: How Shakespeare became Shakespeare* [WW Norton and Co, 2004], written by the renowned Renaissance scholar Stephen Greenblatt, has renewed interest in his enigmatic life.
The Arts and Humanities Research Council, University of Birmingham, UK, has announced a research grant of £358,435 to fund the project 'Interrogating Cultural Value in the 21st Century: the Case of Shakespeare' to begin at the Shakespeare Institute in October 2006. This is a major initiative among many to assess the relevance of Shakespeare's plays in the 21st century.
London papers reported that on 14th July 2006, a near-perfect copy of Shakespeare First Folio sold for £2.8million.

2 Perhaps only Wordsworth and Keats enjoy the same popularity.

3 Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations* [Clarendon Paperbacks, 1990]: vii.

Tutun Mukherjee

The Lake Fewa and a Horse, by Yuyutsu R.D. Sharma, New Delhi, Nirala Publications.

Yuyutsu R.D. Sharma is a poet who has an enormous appetite for life, a poet who exults, rejoices even, in the creation. In these Fewa poems he responds to life with sensuous delight and affection. They glow with warmth.

Some poets are so hardened, so tough-skinned, so rhinocerized that, as Eugene Ionesco said, a single flower wouldn't grow on them, but Yuyutsu, thank god, bursts into bloom at the first tender touch be it from a person or a place, a mountain or a river. He flowers in and out of season

because he is alive to the awe, to the adventure of life. Angels can fly because they take themselves lightly. Yuyutsu is a luminous being of levity.

An Indian by birth and upbringing, he has been a lively creative presence in Nepal for many years and has had a vitalizing effect upon poetry in this country. As a spirited mentor he has helped many of the younger poets to get in contact with their own vital creative energies. His White Lotus Book shop is a petalled place of light, a fragrant sanctuary of poetry; a refuge for those battling onwards across the snowy immensity of the white page; a place where you can become a voyager in the universe of your imagination; a place where you are allowed to have immaculate perceptions, perhaps, even, immaculate conceptions.

I admire Yuyutsu's descriptive acuity, his verbal precisions, his exactitudes. He knows about the enduring clarity of the right words. Denise Levertov, an American poet I greatly admire, stated somewhere that poets, having language in their custody must recognize it as another form of life; a common resource to be cherished and cared for, in the same way that we should show a responsible concern for the earth and it's waters and all its teeming life forms.

Yuyutsu is the kind of poet who is very responsible in his duty to language and careful about its integrity. He resists sloppiness and limpness of language by giving things their true name. In his poems joy, love, grief, loneliness are given a local habitation and a name. In poems like "River: Morning" we hear the language voicing itself at its most acute, singing itself into the light:

Cruel River
Knows each time

I come to brood
Over her roaring waters

Each time I come
To her deafening banks

To gleam my dreams
Over the plump flanks of her warm body

Each time I come
To pour the last of my life's salt

In the ringing gorges
Of her sonorous frame

A bone breaks
In my smouldering chest

And a wrinkle appears
Across the shriveled leaf of my life.

He is a poet of concrete presences; of tangibility; a poet with a Chekovian eye for detail, the significant detail.

I love the fresh spontaneity of his poems, their tuned-in utterance, their turned-on urgency. He writes with an audacity that I find appealing and uplifting. These poems know no bounds, no borders, no barricades. Like light they are boundless in their capacity to cross over, to connect. They succeed in being both intimate and cosmic, rustic and shamanistic. I'm convinced by the assured sounds they make. They connect me to the sacred and the elemental.

Yuyutsu is a visionary of the real:

Rain walks
over the chest of the lake

Making it alive
With its lover's electric touch,

Tense,taut.

But then it stops,
This rain drumming the belly of the lake.

A lonely boat
Appears somewhere

Between the shafts
Of sunlight

(A Rainbow)

He looks at things with a clear-sighted attentiveness; a purity of attention. In a lovely poem by Ted Deppe, a contemporary American poet, he quotes Wittgenstein talking to the crows and urging them "look very closely before you think and only then, if ever, speak." It seems to me that Yuyutsu has trained his eye to look intently, to look intelligently, to see "the sun, a plump plaything, crawling like a baby around the glaciers of Annapurna" Desolate Mountains of Mustang. "Mules" is a sensuously detailed poem that shows how attentive he is to the immediate.

Mules

On the great Tibetan
Salt route they meet me again

Old forsaken friends...

On their faces
Fatigue of a drunken sleep

From carrying
Illustrious flags of bleeding ascents.

Cartons of iceberg, mineral water bottles,
Solar heaters, Chinese tiles, tin cans, carom boards

Sacks of rice
And iodinesed salt from plain of Nepal Terai.

His poetry by its attentiveness to sight and sound makes us readers more aware, more alert. It intensifies our perceptions and reveals to us that the world of the ordinary conceals the extraordinary. May the shamanistic journeys of this mystic of the domestic go on and on.

"It takes little talent to see clearly, what lies under one's nose" according to W.H. Auden, "a good deal of it to know in which direction to point that organ". Auden was wrong! It takes genius to see clearly what lies under one's nose. But Auden was right, sometimes, especially when he observed that "toilets" was an anagram for T.S.Eliot. Yuyutsu is a superbly gifted seer. For him it's a question of seeing so much clearer than the rest of us; of doing to people and places what the light does to them. He is focused. He sees what other person has forgotten to see. He has eyes sharp as tinopeners; they cut through cleanly to the real.

A lonely brook

By the edge of
A lonely brook

A lonely woman
Waits for a stranger to come

And burst
The ice frozen between her thighs

To make a flame
Of her cold sleep

To suck the fog
Of her lungs with the fire of his tongue......

(A Lonely Brook)

Lord Norbery was an 18th century Dublin judge. He was a hard, exacting man by all accounts with a wicked streak of humour. Once, while sentencing a man to death for stealing a pocket watch, he quipped, "you made a grab at time idiot but you caught eternity". A Draconian measure for such a petty offense. However that phrase, that sentence can be appropriated in a more positive manner, of course, to describe the art of Yuyutsu R.D.Sharma. In these poems it seems to me, he has managed to grasp the moment of recognition, the moment of revelation in order to capture it forever. In a world of flux and transience he illuminates small moments with a lyrical intensity. They are experiences made vivid by the alchemy of his art.

Best poems

The kisses you
Refused were the best

Like the poems
On the lake I didn't write.

(Best Poems)

A sense of readiness, an openness to experience, these are virtues I sense very strongly in these poems.

The journey motif is very important in the work. After all the collection is mostly a hymn of colour to the Annapurna area, a psalm in praise of place, a deeply-felt expression of devotional gratitude to a place and to a people near and dear to the poet. To benefit from a journey you have to cultivate a sense of awareness, a readiness to experience whatever the journey brings forth. Even a long walk around your bedroom can be awe-inspiring. A climb up the stairs can be a breath-taking trek. If you don't take any exercises a brisk walk to your vitamin bottle every morning can be a life enhancing experience. All of these strolls can be outings in the imagination, rambles in the psyche.

Another trait that I admire in his work is wisdom. How to become wise is a quest that we are all engaged in. How to repose in the stability

of truth. Once upon a time a little boy asked his shrewd, sharp-witted grandfather how he became wise.

"I'm wise", said the grandfather sagely, "because I have good judgment."

"But how do you get good judgement?"

"Well, you get good judgement from experience."

"But grandfather, how do you get experience?"

"() you get experience", replied the grandfather, thoughtfully, "from poor judgement."

Cathal Ó Searcaigh

Racists, by Kunal Basu, Penguin Books, Pp. 214, Rs.250/-

On a deserted island off the coast of Africa at the end of the 19th century, two infants one a black male and another a white female are left in the care of a young white nurse whose muteness leaves the children to grow up in the wilds unaffected by human speech or civilisational contact of any kind. Carrying out a unique experiment of humans growing up in the raw are two scientists, one a British and the other a French, and as the children grow up more or less like beasts oblivious of the sound of human speech and their only visual experience besides the nurse being the two scientists and their white assistant who visit the island infrequently to measure the growth of the children's cranium, nature and human emotions take their own course abruptly ending the experiment which would have shown who was the superior of the two, the white or the black. Kunal Basu who teaches at Oxford, sets out to charter the course of racism in the western world, but at the end of his narration leaves one lost with a feeling of emptiness and of having been dragged in into quite an unnecessary and improbable plot which is further fouled up by an ending that is nothing but contrived to put it rather mildly. Nicholas Quartley the assistant to Professsor Samuel Bates of the Royal College of Physicians takes off with Norah and they leave the island taking with them the girl child to where else would you think but the west, with the story line having the black male child conveniently wrenched out of the life of his young play mate and the pages of the book when he is kidnapped by sabre rattling pirates who have suddenly descended upon the island in their mean little ship. The assistant-nurse crush not withstanding, and Norah the nurse actually not mute but only just

pretending all this while as the reader is told subsequently (for how else can courtship proceed effectively without both being able to speak to each other), the stage is well set for a wrap up of a weird experiment that need not actually have been initiated to start off with. Is Basu writing about racial supremacy (if it exists), for a western readership.

On quite on another plane, Basu in depicting the animal instincts and base cunning of the growing up infants, paints a fairly accurate picture of a major slice of humanity that endlessely and very competitively keeps clawing away at each other all the time, manoeuvering for power, position and pelf. Shorn of a friendly environment, human company of any kind and basic education which enables further reading and writing providing a universal window to the lives and times of others, humans irrespective of their genes could grow up just like those in the animal kingdom. In another manner then can pristine nature over a period of time overcome the modernism and pull of a loud civilisation, provided of course a setting of this kind was manageable and could be enforced. Or is Basu crafting another message about the perceived disparity in races that till today might exist in some remote parts of the world. Or is it the well-known North-South divide of the world that will take some time in making its retreat. These are some of the disturbing questions that the magic island of Arlinda raises where characters like Monsieur Jean-Louis Belavoix of the Societe Ethnologique de Paris, Belavoix, Quartley and Norah reside and experiment to their heart's content.

The novel, the third after *The Miniaturist* and *The Opium Clerk*, is so relentless, persistent in pursuit and one directional in proving whether one race is better than the other (an exercise that ends in futility, however, due to circumstances on the ground), that quite unnoticed the author seems to have been overtaken by a bit of tender romance which brings to a premature end the cranky experiments of some very funny and absent minded scientists and all those who have been financing them. So then is it a study of medical science, human psychology or the shadow of a racial block that an Indian author settled abroad is highlighting, and sending out a message that nature cannot be tinkered with and will reign supreme in the end inspite of man's mechanization and cunning. In the end, however, nothing seems to go anywhere in the book, with the experiment having been aborted, the theories of the scientists lying in disarray, one integral part of the human specimen kidnapped, and a young assistant carrying away his love to better climes so that they could live together with the children that they had set out to save from two scheming scientists.

All is, however, not lost in Basu's intellectual foray into human behavioural science, and the imponderables that often accompany man's

actions. The smell and sounds of an African island that knows no master ("the tide is high now, the roaring sea answering the call of screaming gulls"), the grandeur of nature and its all pervasive retribution on mankind when the necessary levelling has to be done, and the direct and captivating prose, does succeed in a manner of sort in injecting some movement and life in an otherwise drab, colourless and unnecessary journey.

Himmat Singh Gill

Contemporary Literary Criticism: Theory and Practice. Vol. I & II., N.D.R. Chandra, Authors press, Delhi, 2005. Pp 673; Rs.1,450/- per set.

Ever since I. A. Richards produced his seminal work, *The Principles of Literary Criticism* in 1924 and William Empson his book titled *Seven Types of Ambiguity* in 1930, literary criticism has continued to move forward. While the earlier criticism followed the hallowed practice once adopted by Aristotle in *Poetics* in which the text was put to a close critical analysis, things changed rather dramatically with the appearance of Jacques Derrida in the 1960's on the European scene. It was he who initiated the concept and practice called 'Deconstruction.' With a series of books he established a new tradition in this area. Like Sigmund Freud's psychological theories and Karl Marx's political theories, Derrida's deconstructive strategies, which take off from Ferdinand de Saussure's insistence on the arbitrariness of the verbal sign, have subsequently established themselves as an important part of postmodernism, especially in poststructural literary theory and text analysis. Though the deconstructive principles of Derrida and later critics are well established, they remain somewhat controversial. Not unlike all other areas of knowledge and industry in the field of literary criticism too what got initiated in, the 1960s in Europe has taken all these years to reach the Indian shores in the 21st century via this present publication—apparently with a big bang.

The present publication in two volumes is an attempt to put together 84 write-ups of literary criticism by Indian authors, who teach in the Indian universities and colleges. The idea was to introduce Indian practitioners and teachers (i.e. the local academia) of the art and science of literary criticism with what was or had transpired elsewhere. With suspect teaching habits of the Indian academia in what they read and teach, the present

attempt is like a Divine intervention for the better. In the words of the Editor:

> The most wide-ranging and comprehensive collection of its kind in India, *Modern Literary Criticism: Theory and Practice* and *Contemporary Literary Criticism: Theory and Practice* offer selections from 84 contributors representing major developments from modernism to recent times. Unlike any other anthology, the papers in the present volumes combine theory and practice bridging the gap between these two. The volumes are particularly rich in modern and postmodern literary theory and criticism covering all the major schools and movements such as Existentialism and Nihilism, Socio-historical Criticism, Marxist and Sociological Criticism, Psychological Criticism, Archetypal and Myth Criticism, Formalism and New Aesthetics, Structuralism and Linguistic Criticism, Comparative Aesthetics, Culture, Translation and film theory, Postmodernism, Post Structuralism and Deconstruction, Reader Response Criticism, Feminist Literary Theory Post-Colonialism, Canon and multiculturalism, New-historicism, Ecocriticism and so on.

In brief, it is an ocean full of gems out of which one could pick and choose according to his/her preferences. The other reason was to help the youngsters as compared to the oldies, should be offered readable and teachable material, which they would otherwise have found it ever so difficult to lay their hands on. Interestingly, the Editor himself declares his work as a 'monumental' accomplishment. It would appear that modesty is a virtue seldom discerned among Indians, despite the fact majority of the world's yogis and saints were perhaps born in this subcontinent. He seems to have arrogated to himself a role, which is self-fulfilling.

The present two-volumes on Contemporary Criticism do fulfill a requirement and perhaps a vacuum too. There are not many books on the subject and definitely not all that informative. If for nothing else for this reason alone the Editor deserves our compliments.

A good Indian attempt worthy of appreciation.

R.P. Singh

Collected Poems: 1970-2005 by Keki Daruwalla, Penguin Books, Pp.355, Rs.350/-

"The legs don't move
sometimes the back turns over
like a river changing beds
sometimes the eye gropes
towards an object -
bat-instincts,
at times the arms thrash around
my dreams
like windmills.

But the legs are withered roots
memory has slipped up somewhere
for I don't remember
what hit me in the spine
to turn the legs torpid."

(My Poetry)

He is not an easy poet at most times. "He writes so simply, damn him/ that learned men/are hard put to understand him." He is, in fact, probably, the most complex of the Indian English poets, of the past as well as the present. Not only has his growth been gradual, his concerns as well as preoccupations in terms of content, form and themes have been varied and comprehensive. History, and its recollection, being a significant one. There hardly seems an emotion, from the sublime to the ridiculous – as the jargon goes – that does not find an echo or expression in these pages.

In his poetic growth of three-and-a-half decades, the outcome of which is 181 poems (the volume also includes, apart from these, 20 new and, or, previously unpublished poems) that have appeared in nine volumes. The first of these, *Under Orion* was published by the Writers Workshop in 1970, and the last *The Map-maker* in 2002. The poetic journey has been significant in many literary terms. He is the most stylized amongst us all, often taking refuge in the vagaries of metre and rhyme, and indulging in not always necessary elaboration of a scene, situation, event, or site. His poems stand apart for the impersonal even in an emotional charged personal circumspection which sometimes tends to undermine the intensity of the

whole experience, especially in his love poems. One reason for this could be his deliberate preoccupation with the craft rather titan the emotion. By exerting himself to achieve an effect he tends to undermine the languid flow of thought that would otherwise surface.

Daruwalla's range has grown with time. There is more space for interpretation visible in his later poems. Some of these have been eternally favoured aid appreciated by the readers as well as the academics and critics. These include 'Suddenly the Tree', 'Mother', 'Death Vignette', 'Nightscape', 'The Old Man of the Sea', 'Death by Burial', 'The Ghagra in Spate', 'Ruminations 1 & 11', 'Death of a Bird', 'Ledge Walker', 'Boat-ride along the Ganga', 'Pilgrimage to Badrinath', 'The People', 'Hawk', 'The Unrest of Desire', 'Crossing of Rivers', "The Night of the Jackals', 'The Mistress', 'Monologue in the Chambal Valley', 'Jottings', 'Paradise', 'Caries', 'For My Daughter Anaheita', 'Mehar Ali, the Keeper of the Dead', 'To My Daughter Rookzain', Ruminations at Verinag', 'Chinar', 'History', 'Childhood Poem', 'Insomnia', 'Going Down the Night River', and 'Draupadi'. To this list now can be added the new, longish narrative verses like 'Bypass', 'We, the Kauravas', sections of 'Underwater Notes', 'The Death of Distinctions', 'Poem for a Granddaughter', parts of 'The Happy Woman Speaks to Herself, and 'Nurse and Sentinel'.

There is an undercurrent of either the allegorical or the satirical in a lot of his poems, though at times seeming clinical and bordering on the cynical: "bitter, scornful and satiric", as one unsympathetic academic put it. But Daruwalla is also capable of the other extreme as well while retaining the magic of the ironic wit. He can also excel in blatant mockery as well. He also has the nagging tendency of bringing in mythical or historical characters which appear forced. His imagery is unique in many ways, and so are his concerns and preoccupations. And that one guesses has a lot to do with his observations of reality. Bloodshed, violence and death often creep into his poems either deliberately or effortlessly. Someone has erroneously observed: "Daruwalla does not project the reality of the situation in terms of sociological or any other kind of realism, but in the re-enactment and reinvention of the terms of the mind." What else can a poet do except sincerely try to reenact and reinvent a situation? His urban orcity vignettes are quite unlike in any other Indian English poets: a dying alienated tribe. He has a poem 'To Fellow Indian Poets' which, actually, is a bitter reflection on all those who profess an anti-Indian English stance.

The landscape Daruwalla projects has an insular quality. His poetry is replete with people who one can identify with. He invariably succeeds in drawing the whole picture through words and carefully selected images,

at times with the parameters of rhymed verse which is not easy. This is not only evident, in what for want of a better expression, in his violent poems but also in what many would like to label as nature poems. 'Chinar' is an eternal favourite. One has no quarrel with either the poet or his critics on either count. It is with his love poems that one feels dissatisfied. They seem invariably lacking in both feeling and intensity. The natural warmth, feeling and involvement are generally amiss.

The word is great,
yet there was life before the word.
We can't turn romantic, and say
we were into bird speech or river-roar then,
into the silence of frost
or the language of rain.
But forest speech and swamp speech
came through easier to us.
When lightening crashed,
the cry of the marsh bird was our cry,
and we flung ourselves to the other branch
like any other baboon.

Though there were no words,
fear had a voice with many echoes.
Worship was quieter, adoration
spoke only through the eyes or knees.

What was it like before language dropped like dew,
covering the scuffed grass of our lives.

(Before the Word)

And between 'My Poetry' and 'Before the Word' is the quintessential Keki Daruwalla; a suave, sophisticated urban voice that has sought to feel and tell all that he found worth recounting and reflecting upon in the thirty-five years of a poet's journey.

Suresh Kohli

Women Writing in India (Vol. II): The Twentieth Century ed. by Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, OUP, New Delhi, 2005, Pp.642, Rs.395/-

One could not have asked for a more inspiring volume than the present one to cultivate an interest in the contribution of women to the body of Indian literatrue. The book is glorious tribute to the monumental achievements of women writers of the legacy left behind by them. It is a tribute to the lives they had lived and the price they paid in their transactions during their lifetimes. There is a wealth of biographical head notes of not merely the well-known authors but even of those reduced to penury, their work neglected and long forgotten.

The editors have clearly stated at the preface that the collection is not exhaustive. Thus we are deprived of the rich Assamese literature which has a long and enduring list of women writers. Neither have been the great Punjabi,Rajasthani,Kashmiri or Sindhi writers been represented. The constraints must have been colossal but apparently not insurmountable for these two brave ladies who were undaunted by the effort required in presenting to the English reading world gems of Urdu, Marathi, Kannada, Bengali, Malayalam, Tamil, Gujarati, Telugu, Oriya and Hindi woman writers. The list of acknowledgements give evidence to the grandiose cooperation of the innumerable people who offered their invaluable support to the editors during the compilation of this labour of love. While going through the stories it is important to keep in mind that this is an effort of an era when women who were wives, companions and mothers 'also wrote...'

A critical estimate of women's literature has always been prejudiced. According to Mary Ellmann, male academics and reviewers indulged in a kind of inverted fidelity in the analysis of women's books by treating them upon intellectual measuring of busts and hips! The patriarchal ideology in the nineteenth as argued by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar of the image of the writer as one who is the Divine Creator who fathers his work and the pen being invariably demonstrated as a phallic image; this is a period in time when women could not both write and remain feminine.

The second half of the nineteenth century witnessed the emergence of expressive realism almost simultaneously with the realist novel. In the late sixties and early seventies the idea gained strength within feminist criticism that women's experience is a fount of resource. That woman's experiences thus far a hidden secret of insecurity could be articulated to try to make sense of what they observed or felt. Fortunately, the editors, working under the premise that not all literature written by women is

feminist or is written about women have not restricted to concentrating merely on texts that exclusively express women's real experiences or portray real women.

Much of the literature in this volume sketches the politics and imagination of the forties and fifties into the nineties; about the evolving character of what defines an Indian. In the dynamics of change from an emerging independent country to an underdeveloped country and then to a rapidly developing economy, being Indian is constantly being redefined. The Nehruvian years between 1947 to 1968 marked the passing of a modified version of the Hindu Code Bill in 1955 which was the first legislative initiative that sought to create a uniform law ensuring women some rights to property and succession in addition to treating them as equal to men in relation to marriage and divorce. Widespread disaffection between 1968 to 1975 saw women who had been relatively quiet on the political front after Independence emerge in large numbers to participate in movements that demanded the inclusion of women's questions on the political, social and even religious agendas of the country. They even formed separate women's organizations. Thus the timeless notion of 'Indian Sensibility' has been approached in a more practical manner by trying to understand the nation and nationality not as an essence, but as a historically constituted terrain, changing and contested, and its citizen subjects as subjects-in-struggle, and therefore also always in process.'

It is against this backdrop that literature in this volume has to be approached. In the Urdu segment, a predictable inclusion is Ismat Chugtai's "Lihaf" which brought the author notoriety when she wrote it in 1931. It portrays a lesbian relationship witnessed through the eyes of a child. Rasheed Jahan's "Woh", however, has as its theme a moral awakening of the nameless protagonist to social responsibility. A disfigured and diseased prostitute in purdah with her 'crooked eye' and a ghastly noseless face insists on befriending the protagonist who is a young upper middle class woman for whom 'existence was an expectancy'. Siddhiqa Begum Sevharvi's 'Tara Laraz Rahe Hai' explores the eternal flaw of inequality between being a sister and being a wife. A hard-hitting sentence from the mother nails home the fact: The moment a girl is married—she maybe only twelve—she is no longer young. These glowing cheeks last only a few days. Then when something stirs in the belly, it's all up.

Shivani Pant of Hindi is considered by many to be one ot the most Influential feminine voices in India. The character she has sculptured in 'Dadi' hesitates to eat food cooked by the new cook of uncertain caste but when he is exposed of being a Pakistani spy she is the one who rescues him from the uncivilized frenzy of mob hysteria and hands him over to the police

as a law abiding citizen. Women like 'Dadi' are instrumental in holding together the nation and ushering it safely into the modern era.Manjul Bhagat's 'Bebeji' is strikingly familiar to Shivani's 'Dadi'.Again a story of an upper class widow who is instrumental in bringing about a social change in her own orbit by adopting a lower class family when abandoned by her flesh and blood. Mrinal Pande's powerful post emergency story "Hum Safar" is a study of the eighties. In sharp contrast to the widows in the novels of the reform movement, the widow here is a psychologically rounded character. Voiceless, powerless, statusless, this harried widow displays a pathetic outburst upon her son, the only person around to recognize her presence .Time has undoubtedly left its mark on the standing of the widow in the Indian context.

The Marathi section includes Hamsa Wadkar's memoir of an independent working woman of the 1940s and 1945s who traverses towards a tunnel of tragedy. Kamala Desai is another Marathi writer acknowledged for her intense and sophisticated language.Desai abstained from matrimony for she believed marriage would curtail her independence as a writer.Desai's focus is on selfhood and autonomy. Baby Kamble was the first Dalit woman to write an autobiography in Marathi *Jina Amucha* (Our Wretched Lives) in 1986. And then there is Gauri Deshpande who abandons even the nuclear family as an institution of the past and portrays her characters as fiercely independent individuals.

Mahasweta Devi dominates Bengali women's literature. In fact, she is widely acknowledged as one of the most powerful voices in India today. She concentrated her writings mostly with the agrarian movements of the late sixties, the formerly untouchable castes and in the late seventies she focused primarily on the tribal of Bihar, Orissa and West Bengal.

M.K. Indira, of Karnataka started writing at the age of forty-five but established herself as a major voice in Kannada literature. *Phaniyamma*, a novel loosely based on her great aunt's life is the story of a widow who never complains or boldly rebels but does question and even acts against the irrational demands of tradition when they hurt others.The extract included in this volume is from the later part of the novel when Phaniyamma is about eightytwo.All the severe fasts and difficult pilgrimages she had undertaken to purify herself is placed on the balance when she is requested to help a difficult childbirth of a lower caste woman. The novel was directed by Prema Karanth into a much acclaimed movie that went on to win national and international awards.

In the much acclaimed Tamil writer Rajam Krishnan's story "Kaipidite Kadaloruvanai", the concluding rhetoric is bound to have troubled many an educated "...Her uneducated mother-in -law could be convinced without

great difficulty but how was one to deal with this woman with a masters degree. Honestly, how many of us literate Indians can claim to be truly educated? The fundamental reality is that degrees in themselves are not enough knowledge to always mould a broadminded, erudite personality.

Varsha Adalja,Gujarati author of repute researches meticulously on the background of her subjects before crafting her characters. Which is why after reading 'Bichari Champudi' you can never again pass a little beggar girl dancing in the streets and not be overcome with grief. Adalja's story of a family of traditional folk singers ring so true.

According to critic Jancy James, "In the entire history of women's writing in Kerela, Saraswati Amma's is the most tragic case of the deliberate neglect of female genius." Amma's writing is directed mostly at women in an attempt at shattering their illusions about love and men.

The oral history of Daudala Salamma, a participant of the Telangana People's Struggle transports us to a place and time when history ushered in a change. The People's Struggle was against the forced labour and other exactions by the Nizam of Hyderabad State and Hindu landlords. Women's participation in the movement was indispensable and Salamma,a peasant woman became an efficient squad leader.

The poetry section is intense but glory. Reading so much grief together can prove more of a daunting task than a pleasurable experience. Most of the poetry is on gender inequality, dissatisfaction, rebellion.Vimala's(Telugu) "Vantillu" (kitchen) explicitly moans what the poets and writers have repeatedly implied in this volume:

> Damn all kitchens. May they burn to cinders
> The kitchens that steal our dreams drain our lives, eat our days...
>
> That turned us into serving spoons

Nilakshi

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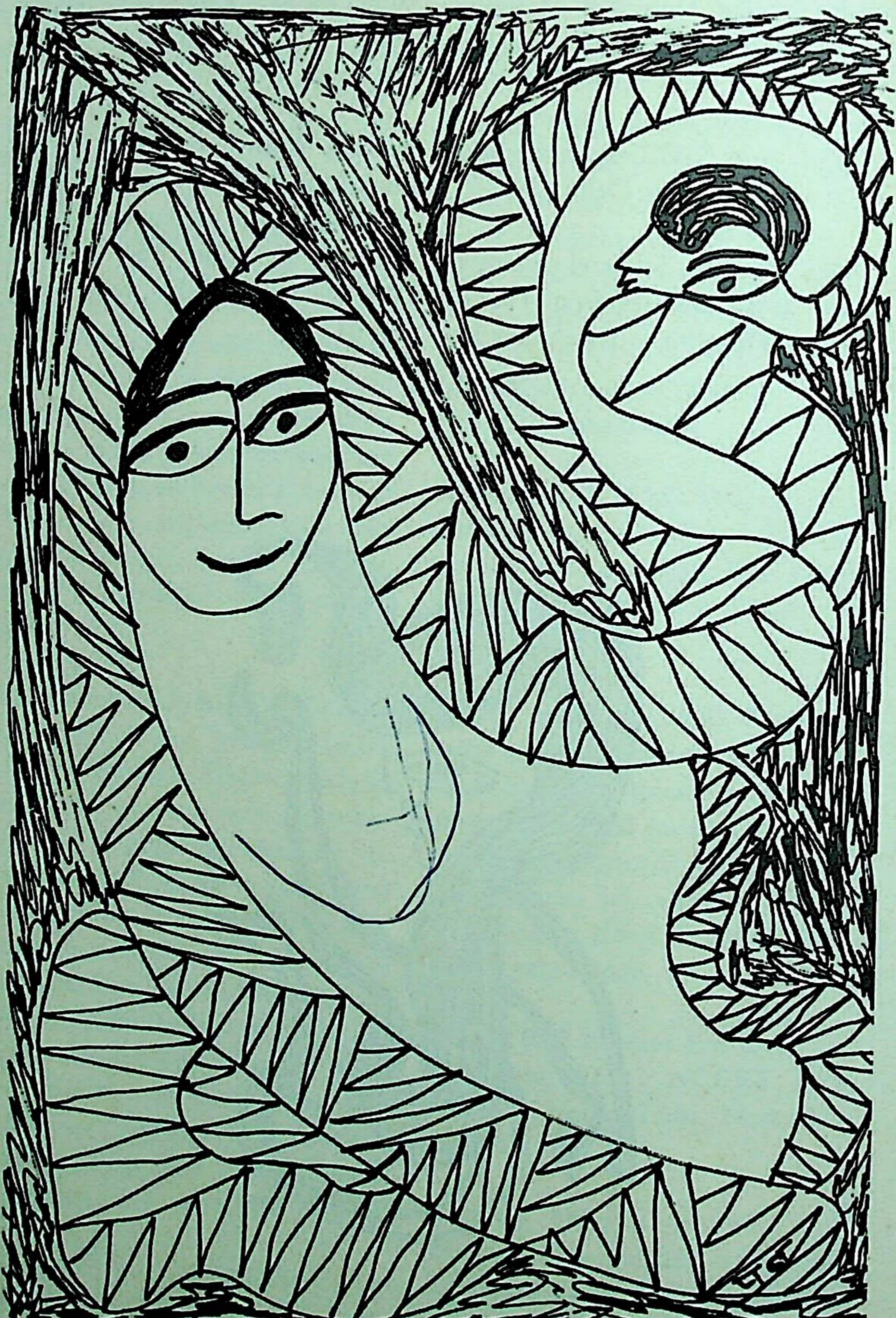
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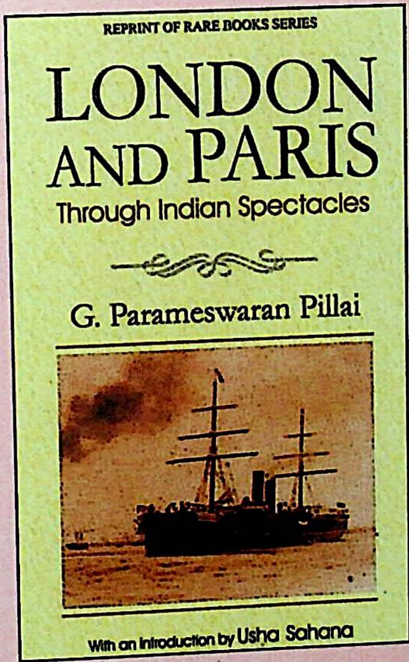
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